



Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents twenty-nine school-based action research projects developed within a network of over fifty schools in Northern Ireland that was established by researchers at EQI – The Centre for Evaluation Quality and Inspection at Dublin City University. All those schools and researchers involved in this network have voluntarily engaged in this work, and at their own cost, with a *Hearts and Minds* mentality whose ultimate purpose is to improve the life chances of learners from all school types in Northern Ireland.

The work of the network has been greatly influenced by recommendations derived from a previous EQI project titled *Polycentric Inspection of Networked Schools (PINS)*. It is based on the belief that schools often encounter barriers to improve when working in isolation, and so the idea of linking schools in networks regardless of their geographical location seemed like a logical progression to further understanding the conditions necessary for effective professional learning by both individual and networked schools.

The work was also grounded in the reality that there is a great resistance by many schools to become actively engaged with self-evaluation. Indeed, many research studies have provided plausible explanations as to why teachers do not engage with self-evaluation such as capacity deficits in Data Informed Decision Making, worries about judgements on teaching practice and the overly bureaucratic nature of the process. Whether perceived or true, one theme that has always remained constant within the discourse of the school evaluation literature is that some teachers do not view self-evaluation as being particularly relevant or useful to ensuring the best possible outcomes for their students. However, the critical evidence emerging from this research is that the model of professional learning that was used with this network has resulted in changing positive attitudes towards self-evaluation.

Those who were involved in the network do not see self-evaluation as being that of another initiative that has been bolted onto their increasingly heavy workload. Instead, self-evaluation is now viewed as a powerful and continuous process to improving the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. A clear but rigorous focus on quality learning as distinct from an undue focus on teaching was a key factor in the willingness of teachers to engage in the work of this network, often at their own expense and in their own time. In addition, school management released teachers from school to engage in the work, providing cover within their own schools and from their own school budget. There are clear messages therefore for the dissemination of this network practice to schools throughout Northern Ireland and indeed further afield.

A very effective way of professional learning has emerged in the production of these case studies which we characterize as a *Shaped Network*. On the one hand, those involved in the network could operate with a great deal of autonomy to choose their own focus for school improvement and associated school-based action research. On the other hand, they were also required to operate with a clearly defined focus using the school development plan as the foundations for the research and the rigorous use of first-hand evidence to measure impact.

A number of other interesting findings from this research have emerged. Firstly, it has a *Hearts and Minds* driving force that is centered on the ethical use of first-hand evidence to drive school improvement and associated action research.

Secondly, it is underpinned by the existence and support from external agencies, in this case, researchers at EQI. All parties emphasised the central importance of regular contact with and follow-up by members of EQI. This was perceived as vital in growing the network and guided schools to focus on using available first-hand

evidence including statistics to examine issues around teaching and learning and teacher professional learning related to the action research topic chosen in their individual schools.

An important question, of course, is whether it can be shown that activities such as the case studies undertaken here, which improve cooperation and provide professional development opportunities for teachers do lead to the most important outcome of all, improved learning for children. It is always hard to establish such related effects in educational research. However, there was substantial agreement by participants in schools that the professional development provided during the study, particularly the ongoing discussions of best practice emerging, and subsequent adjustments by participants and advisors if needed, enabled the case study work to have a direct ongoing positive impact on improving the actual quality of learning in individual schools.

A key learning point that also emerged was the gradual transfer of responsibility for professional learning provision from the EQI researchers to the leaders and teachers involved in the network/cluster. The staff involved from the various schools reported that because they were able to take the advice given and contextualize the advice given to their school situations, including a strong link with their school development plans, this empowered not just the staff attending the professional learning sessions but also those back in participants individual schools to take ownership of their own professional learning throughout the period of the action research. All participants reported this building of confidence in their professional capacity for school-based action research at the school level as ensuring that the good practice in school-based action research and school improvement is sustained beyond the three years of this present cycle of work. A key strategic point worth making here is that, if this model of professional learning was adopted more generally, then the appropriate role of professional development support becomes one of facilitation and enablement as opposed to any generic or disconnected support that might be offered to schools.

Finally, an important aspect of this research to be considered is how to take this successful network's results regarding the use of school-based action research to effect school improvement in other schools and other jurisdictions. This is a difficult question to answer. The participants in the network would say, that the key is to convince teachers to use non-bureaucratic techniques to look at First-hand Evidence of how good learning is in the classroom but to do this where possible and predominantly in a nonjudgmental and collegiate manner. We call this horizontal self-evaluation. The work in these case studies suggests that there is also a place for vertical or judgmental self-evaluation, if we focus on the quality of learning, and not have a fixation on teaching performance. However, there is an ethical need to be clear as to which technique is being used for self-evaluation and more particularly for what purpose.

In conclusion, many issues still need to be resolved before horizontal and vertical self-evaluation become a genuinely accepted tool for continuous school improvement. These issues relate not so much to the methods used in the techniques themselves but the balance between horizontal and vertical self-evaluation and the purposes for which they are used. If these issues can be resolved, self-evaluation can become a powerful tool for continuous school improvement in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Dr.Paddy Shevlin and Dr. Martin Brown
Project Co-ordinators – EQI Shaped Professional Learning Networks (Northern Ireland)