

How do schools in Scotland measure their own progress?

3. Formal accountability processes

In recent years, the Scottish education system has had an increasing focus on the measurement and management of performance by schools. As part of AERS, we are investigating the ways in which performance data are used by schools. Six schools in different areas of Scotland provide case studies, and demonstrate how they are using different types of data to inform practice and school improvement. In this Feedback we describe the use of performance data in the case study schools for formal accountability processes.

- Scottish schools are required to demonstrate their accountability through a number of formal processes. These include internal processes of self-evaluation, audit and development planning (also known as improvement planning), and external processes such as support and challenge by the quality improvement team of their local authority, and inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). They are also accountable to parents and the general public.
- Data on attainment are an important part of the formal accountability processes in all the case study schools.
- In some schools the processes of self-evaluation and development planning, including evaluation of performance data, are consciously used to challenge complacency and drive school improvement. In other schools the processes are more bureaucratic.
- There are differences between the schools in the extent to which they feel supported or challenged by the use of data by their local authorities.
- Management teams in all of the schools are aware of external pressures from local authorities and HMIE to raise attainment. Four of the six schools had recent experience of inspection, and staff described how this had sharpened their focus on performance data.
- Most schools are conscious of the need to provide information to parents and public, but the creation of Standards and Quality report tends to be regarded as a "chore".

Formal accountability processes

The focus on performance data in formal accountability processes has been strongly promoted by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) since 1991, when the first sets of Standard Tables of examination results were issued to secondary schools with instructions for school self-evaluation and development planning. These formal accountability processes – including the internal processes of self-

evaluation, audit and development planning by the school, and the external processes of evaluation by the local authority, and inspection by HMIE – were enshrined in law by the Standards in Scotland's schools Act 2000. The Act gave government, education authorities and schools a statutory duty to "secure improvement in the quality of school education" (HMIE 2007).

Quantitative measures of pupil attainment provide important evidence for accountability purposes. The focus in the secondary case studies is on National Qualifications (NQ) and Standard Tables and Charts (STACS), and in the primary case studies on levels achieved in the 5-14 National Assessments, and also in one school on standardised assessments. Other data considered in some schools relate to behavioural issues and attendance/absence.

Self-evaluation using attainment data

In Feedback 2 we describe the processes adopted in the case study schools for evaluating data to identify issues they need to address. Such evaluation is part of the model of school self-evaluation set out in “How Good is Our School?” (HGIOS).

In three of the school case studies the management teams are attempting to use the formal self-evaluation and development planning processes to drive up attainment. For example, one of the primary schools is located in a very deprived area where low levels of parental literacy are an issue. After evaluation of 5-14 data the school identified the need to raise levels of reading and writing, and introduced a number of initiatives.

It's concentrated our minds in a whole number of issues. Mainly, how were we delivering the curriculum? What methodology were we using? What materials and what courses were we following? And actually where were children coming from and how were we going to get them up to the next level? How were we moving children on? How could we follow all that?

In secondary schools the STACS provide an important source of evidence for self-evaluation, and there are formal rounds of discussion of STACS in which subject departments are “held to account” by management. A number of interviewees value the STACS for providing the “bigger picture”, and thus challenging complacency.

I think we all need to be kept on our toes, we all need to be aware of the picture around our own authority and the picture nationally. I think it is helpful as long as it's part of a dialogue and not just “Oh these are the statistics, you're doing well or you're doing badly” - end of story. It's down to the interpretation and the dialogue but certainly I think the comparisons both comparative schools nationally, relative values which obviously is an internal comparison, progression values, these are all valuable statistics.

There is also a sense that self-evaluation makes teachers feel personally accountable for results.

Personally, I see the results as a personal reflection on how good I am as a professional. So if the results stink, then I should be held responsible for them, even though I'm not the one that sat the exam ... I do feel responsible.

Self evaluation using Quality Indicators

Since its introduction twelve years ago, the process of self-evaluation using the HGIOS Quality Indicators (QI) has become more formalised. We heard anecdotes of rather inefficient approaches in previous years.

There were 3 meetings a year where the staff had taken all the QIs - and there are tens of them - and had this lovely pile of sheets and the PT staff were “so where do you think we are - one to four at that stage or on the first one?” - and managed to get to sheet 2 before the end of the meeting and never ever got to the end. And it was collated and didn't really seem to inform the plan. So what I had to do was start to talk about self-evaluation - “why are we doing this? What do you think?”

In some schools, management teams find the HGIOS structures of accountability useful as a management tool, which, although time consuming, is probably worth it.

It gives me personally an overview of the difficulties that departments face with regard to the need for in-service courses or for additional training, and what it allows us to do I think, I hope holistically, is to look at if the school has any shortcomings, what are they? Where are the areas that we're not doing particularly well? I don't think there are very many of them at the moment. Where are these areas? What's the problem - is there something we can do about it? Do we need an extra member of staff to solve that problem? Do we need extra training for those members of staff to solve that problem? So although it's time-consuming it probably does give us quite a good set of tools to do future planning

One Faculty Head highlighted the need to ensure that auditing the faculty's performance is a focused activity rather than attempting to audit all aspects of the department's work; it is not possible to take into account every piece of statistical evidence.

It's a bit like trying to squeeze an elephant through a keyhole.

Improvement planning

For the most part improvement plans are written by management teams, indicating areas that have been identified as priority. Although teachers in un-promoted posts may be consulted, few express interest in them. The headteacher in one of the case study schools is attempting to engage staff more genuinely in the process.

"I inherited ... a fairly autocratic system where the head teacher wrote the development plan ... and it appeared one day on the staff room table and that was the development plan. There was pretty little degree of ownership or understanding – it was just something that sat around for a while. ... That actually took a wee while to get to a stage where staff actually start to contribute to the development plan and realise that they had contributed"

However, another secondary case study school has attempted to computerise (and minimise) the burden of self-evaluation and development planning. The school uses a dedicated website to allow the plan to be entered at both school, and departmental level, with on-going self-evaluation via the HGIOS QIs. The school plan expresses the intention that "Improvement therefore should be seamless, flexible and responsive to changes at all levels."

Support and challenge by local authority

In two of the schools senior staff mentioned an increasing focus on accountability in their dealings with their authority. One headteacher suggested "The authority shares my priorities in terms of attainment" – s/he also believes that the school does not need to worry about an imminent inspection by HMIE because they are actively pursuing the quality improvement procedures required by the authority, and consequently will have the support of the authority whatever the result.

Members of the management teams in a number of the case study schools expressed appreciation for the help provided by local authority staff in analysing and presenting data, and comparing National Assessment results across the authority schools. However, one of the primary headteachers is rather critical of the authority focus on 5-14 data because staff at the school find National Assessments to be unhelpful, and the school invests in regular standardised tests for all pupils.

In each of the case study schools there is a regular cycle of reviews by the quality improvement officer (QIO) of the local authority, who has responsibility to "support and challenge" the school in order to improve performance. However, there are clear differences between the case studies in the extent to which schools feel supported by their QIO.

We have a very good relationship with our quality improvement officer, and yes he will come in and support and challenge us as well, because he does audits of the attainment and other areas from How Good is our School?. So we have to prepare our case. If we've grilled a particular department about why the attainment is not improving, then that helps us make our case to the quality improvement officer. But again it's about support and challenge from him. He will come in with supportive ideas and suggestions as well, but obviously he will also challenge and be looking for us to make improvements that he's identified, as we should have done I would say he does challenge but he's not like a dog with a bone.

On the other hand, two of the schools (one secondary and one primary) do not find the role of the QIO to be helpful.

Inspection

In all of the case studies, we found constant awareness of National Priorities for raising attainment, and belief that HMIE will criticise schools that do not fit their view of improving schools. Two of the secondary schools were anticipating inspection in the near future and rehearsing their responses to potential criticism of their results.

Four of the case studies had fairly recent experience of inspection and described the processes they had put in place as a consequence of HMIE recommendations – such as systems of pupil tracking, classroom observation etc. In one of the secondary schools there was evidently some dissatisfaction about the measures used by HMIE for defining comparator schools.

When we had the HMI inspection they used a particular set of criteria to judge our results. ... We had judged that our results should be termed as 'Adequate' and they wanted to term them as 'Weak'. We argued the case quite strongly that if they had used different criteria to analyse our results they would come up with a different outlook on them. And subsequently that is what happened, and so it seems to me, that when the HMI and the authority are stuck on a particular methodology, then it doesn't always reflect the true picture ... So we were a bit disappointed that that had happened because it reflected badly on our results. And we felt that had an effect of demoralising the staff. But we understand that it has to be an even playing field and that, therefore, they were using the same statistical device across all of the schools. But we did feel that that had been unfairly used against us if you like.

However, in two of the schools (one secondary and one primary) the headteachers suggested that the inspection was helpful in forcing staff to take quality improvement processes seriously - prior to inspection the headteachers felt they had been facing an uphill battle to persuade some staff of the need to use data to evaluate their performance, but the inspection had identified areas of underachievement that were now being addressed.

Parents and public

Most schools are conscious of the need to provide information to parents and public. In several of the case study schools interviewees stated that parents are not interested in the “league tables” of schools, but need reassurance that the school is doing well. Nevertheless, management in one of the primary case studies spoke of considerable parental pressure to ensure that pupils achieve high levels of 5-14 National Assessments at the P7 stage so that they enter high sets on entry to secondary school.

One of the processes by which schools are accountable to parents and the public is through the requirement to produce an annual Standard and Quality (S&Q) report. However, very little was said by interviewees about S&Q reports in the case study schools except by one DHT who regarded it as “a bit of a chore”. In view of the public relations aspect of the report s/he feels the S&Q report should give a positive gloss.

I think you are aware that this is not just for the Authority, but you've got a summary out to parents and you want to be seen to be being successful and you're going to emphasise your successes. Where things haven't quite worked out, you're probably into euphemisms – you're maybe talking about “well this still needs to be taken forward next year”. We're not going to say that particular issue failed – it has no impact. Not because we want to be cloak and dagger or that we want to falsify or give a misleading impression of how we're doing.

Discussion

Formal processes of accountability using quantitative measures are quite strongly established in Scottish schools – with suggestions that accountability mechanisms have become more rigorous in recent years following the HMIE inspections of local authorities.

However, we wonder if there is a danger that the focus on measurable targets – such as the percentage of the S4 cohort achieving 5+ awards at Standard Grade – may be diverting attention from the wider purposes of education that are less easy to measure. In two of the secondary case studies staff described tensions between the desire to provide pupils with wider experiences and life skills, and the possible impact on overall levels of academic attainment.

The National Priorities represent an aspiration for the education system to have wider purposes than attainment. Initially, there were attempts to develop performance measures for each priority so that progress towards them could be evaluated. However, priorities such as “values and citizenship” and “learning for life” are more difficult to measure objectively than attainment. It seems that as a consequence they have not received the amount of attention they deserve. Now, a Curriculum for Excellence is providing a wider view of achievement and focusing on flexible, personalised learning to encourage the fullest development of every pupil, and these developments will pose new challenges for school evaluation.

When carrying out the case studies we were often conscious of HMIE as “the elephant in the room” – a continuous awareness of the need for schools to perform in ways that would be approved by inspectors. However, recent pronouncements from HMIE have emphasised their wish for schools to move away from a compliance agenda, i.e. away from a feeling that schools must follow a particular line that is expected by the HMIE. Emphasis is shifting towards a ‘tougher intelligent accountability’ agenda, where schools are expected to set their own challenges (albeit they must be measurable through the HGIOS QIs). It remains to be seen whether schools’ interpretation of data and the resultant steps taken to raise attainment will be increasingly imaginative and daring.

References

HMIE (2007) How Good is Our School? The Journey to Excellence

Findings of this research

AERS Feedbacks to case-study schools will comprise:

1. Tracking systems
2. Evaluating data to identify issues
3. Formal accountability processes
4. Issues relating to the use of assessment data

CES Briefings 37 and 43 report other findings of this AERS study and can be downloaded from:

www.ces.ed.ac.uk/publications/briefings.htm

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