The Powerful Potential of Research as a Tool in Change Management

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Background

In 1995, the AIMHI Project was initiated by the Ministry of Education with the objective of improving the educational outcomes of Pacific Island and Maori students in decile one secondary schools. It was the first pro-active schooling improvement project set up by the Ministry's School Support Project and has been conducted as a partnership between the Ministry and the AIMHI Forum[1]. Originally, there were eight schools involved but during 1998, a ninth school joined the Project. At the same time as the schools began working on the AIMHI Project, an independent, longitudinal evaluation also began. The Institute for Professional Development and Educational Research (IPDER) was commissioned to write a baseline report for each of the schools, research the factors that influence student achievement, conduct ongoing formative evaluation of the Project and, later, to support the schools to establish or expand their own data collection systems. This year, the focus of the research is observing successful classroom practice.

There have been many important influences on the success of the AIMHI Project: the commitment and resources of the Ministry of Education, the combined energy and support of the cluster of schools that make up the AIMHI Project, and the special qualities and skills of the Principals, staff and trustees within the schools. The research has also been a key influence, particularly in the management of the change process. This paper examines the ways in which the research has impacted on individual and collective decision-making. It will provide some examples, from the many available, of how the schools have used

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[1] This comprises the Principals and Chairpersons of the nine schools as well as Ministry representatives.

the feedback to initiate new projects, adapt programmes, make changes to the school's culture, reorganise administrative systems, improve curriculum delivery and address issues of teacher quality. It will also outline some of the ethical dilemmas for the researchers in using the data and some of the difficulties in giving the feedback, particularly when the messages have not been positive.

Methodology

Since the collection of the baseline data in 1996 and the writing of the first research report[2], the research has mainly taken the form of formative evaluation. A range of data has been collected from a variety of sources. These include the analysis of documents; interviews with the Principals and members of the Senior Management teams; interviews with trustees and attendance at some Boards of Trustees' meetings; group discussions with students; interviews with teaching and non-teaching staff; observations at a wide variety of school activities and events; interviews, discussions and telephone conferences with a range of Ministry personnel; and attendance at all AIMHI planning meetings, Forum meetings, Principals' meetings, Principal retreats and parent meetings.

Sample sizes are large. Initially, over 1000 students were involved in small group discussions. At least the same number was interviewed over the 1997/1998 year. All staff and trustees have been interviewed at least once and key staff have been interviewed several times each year.

From the outset, there was a clear determination that the evaluation process would be transparent to the schools and that oral or written summaries of the analysed data would be made available to them on an ongoing basis. This meant that the researchers combined the requirement to collect evaluative data with the need for the schools to have ongoing feedback to help them initiate new programmes, monitor the progress of those developments and know what adjustments and changes are needed to make them work effectively. In addition to the researchers initiating feedback opportunities, requests for feedback have also come from the schools or the groups involved (the Ministry, the Forum, the Principals' Group).

The forums and methods used to give feedback have varied, as have the personnel involved. They have included feedback sessions at staff meetings; presentations at workshops with groups of staff or at whole staff professional development days; face-to-face or telephone discussions with the Principals; discussions with Senior Management Teams or key staff involved in a particular development; and tele-conferences with Ministry personnel. Forms of written feedback have included single diagrams, bullet-pointed notes and a range of reports of varying length and detail. In all cases, the feedback has remained confidential to the groups to whom it has been given, unless negotiated otherwise.

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[2] 'Towards Making Achieving Cool: Achievement in Multi-Cultural High Schools', Kay Hawk and Jan Hill, 1996, Ministry of Education, Wellington.

Ways in which the research feedback has supported the change processes in the schools

Creating awareness

The very process of being externally evaluated changed the dynamics of the development process for the schools. From the outset, they knew that a requirement of becoming an AIMHI school was a commitment to participating in the research. They also knew it was a requirement of the research team to produce some written reports that would be made public. They were aware that the research was formative and that, throughout the Project, they would be involved in a confidential process of both giving and receiving feedback. The schools realised they were in the spotlight. These factors have continued to heighten awareness of their actions and help them maintain the momentum for change.

Identifying needs

A pivotal role of the research has been to identify needs for both individual schools as well as for the Project as a whole. Sometimes, the needs that emerged from the data have been unexpected and surprising for the participants. In one particular school, the proximity of the guidance and health rooms to the offices of senior staff and the role confusion of some of the staff involved, meant that some students were not using the services or were not receiving the best of services. The school was unaware of the impact this was having on students and since then, a number of radical changes in this area have transformed the delivery of support services to the students.

In some instances, the school had already identified the need but clarification was required in order for informed and wise decisions to be made about the next steps to be taken. In one school the senior team wanted feedback on its deaning system. They were unsure whether they needed more deans or whether it was necessary to change the way the current deans operated. The research data indicated that a third dean was needed and, in addition, helped them to decide at which year level that person needed to be placed.

Affirmation of progress

Affirmation has worked on two levels. Firstly, the research has helped to remind the schools about their starting position when they joined the Project and to reflect on the enormous progress they have made. Six of the schools came into the AIMHI Project in 1996 with very vulnerable or falling rolls. Three of the schools had received very negative publicity following the release of unfavourable ERO reports, three principals had resigned and one school had a commissioner. A few of the schools had a history of conflict. In the last three years the data show that the rolls in the six most fragile schools have either stabilised or slightly increased. In all cases there are many instances of new

initiatives and developments that staff and students report are supporting and enhancing learning and teaching. There is a great deal about which the schools can be very positive, both individually and collectively but it is easy to lose sight of that perspective when a school is in the middle of making major changes. The reminders are especially critical for those Principals, senior staff and teachers who have joined the staff of an AIMHI school since 1996 and did not experience the pre-AIMHI situation.

In addition to providing a larger perspective of overall progress, the research is also able to provide affirmation at a micro level. There are instances of schools taking considerable risks to implement new programmes or systems and where feedback has helped to motivate staff to continue with the work. In one school, a new tutor group system was implemented. It involved every teacher, including the Principal, in a full period of tutor time each day. An outside curriculum facilitator was employed to provide training and support for teachers and many of the staff worked extremely hard to ensure the programme worked well. After a year of trialling and fine-tuning, the feedback was almost totally positive from both staff and students. The data provided inspiration to continue with the system into the new year and to target ongoing development and support for a few tutors experiencing difficulties with the changes.

Pre-empting problems

There are a number of examples where the research has helped to pre-empt problems at an early stage. There have been several instances where programmes have been redirected or salvaged as a result of the feedback. One of the schools set up an adult, in-class, student support programme, Tu Tangata, with the dual purpose of decreasing truancy and minimising disruptive behaviour in classrooms. At a very early stage, the research identified that teachers had differing expectations of the role of the adult 'supporters'. Some were more active in the classes than others and teachers were resentful of the time and energy it was taking to embed the programme. Some were resentful that initial expectations of the programme were not materialising. Students had a different opinion but had some clear feedback about the need for the 'supporters' to be good role models. Most of the misunderstandings were not being communicated and it was clear that tension was escalating. After the data had been gathered and fed back to senior staff, the whole programme was discussed and confusions and concerns addressed. In the opinion of senior staff, the feedback prevented the misunderstandings developing to a point from which it may have been difficult to retrieve the programme. There were sufficient positive indicators for the trial to continue into 1999 and feedback is now much more encouraging. Data are being regularly collected by the school and entered into a database for evaluation purposes.

'Off-loading'

The researchers also played a change management role in providing opportunities for participants to 'off-load'. The interviews became a safe forum where they could speak confidentially. The researchers were willing listeners

and the participants knew their ideas and opinions were not only being heard but were also being recorded. This 'off-loading' was described by some of the participants as *therapeutic* or *like a counselling session*. The process of talking, responding to the researcher's questions or prompts, and being listened to was often an opportunity for the participants to clarify issues for themselves and a chance for them to come to understand their own position as well as the position of others.

Giving difficult messages

In order to give the participants the information they needed to make changes, it has been necessary, at times, to feed back information they did not want to hear. The degree of honesty and directness used in giving that feedback has posed some of the most difficult ethical dilemmas in the project. There is a tension between using data to provide honest feedback that can empower participants and withholding or diluting the message in some way in order to preserve relationships and keep a semblance of order and comfort. There is a danger that in being honest, the researchers will be seen as too negative, too damning and implicating others in ways that are not helpful. Conversely, those who have provided the data may question the credibility of the researcher if important and consistent messages are ignored or not made clear.

Because of the sensitive nature of this kind of feedback, there have been many instances in the last three years when the researchers have debated amongst themselves, and sought advice from their Advisory Group and Ministry personnel, about which feedback to give which stakeholders and how and when it should be delivered. Critical to this decision-making process was the depth and detail of the data. If the data provided fine-grained detail then it was much easier to justify giving the message and for it to be received. The independence of that data, and of the person giving it, also made it easier for the messages to be accepted. Sometimes the issues had been ignored or covered up for years and the independent data and the independence of the person delivering the message were what made it possible for them to be uncovered. While, in most instances, the feedback has been welcomed and sometimes greeted with relief, there have also been times when it has been met with resistance and denial. Nonetheless, school personnel are constantly telling the researchers that the honesty and directness of the feedback has been critical to the data being used successfully.

Exposing myths

The research helped the change management process by exposing some myths and challenging long-held assumptions. For example, one school trialled mixed and single sex classes in year 9 because a contributing intermediate organises itself this way. The assumptions made by the school were that parents wanted single-sex classes and that students would achieve more highly in that situation. After a year, it was decided not to continue with them as the disadvantages outweighed any possible perceived advantages. The dynamics of both the boys and girls classes became more problematic as the year progressed and teachers

reported more bullying and dominating behaviour in the single sex classes than in the mixed classes. It also eroded the ability of the schools to manage learning needs within classes.

Another school spent time and money improving the appearance of the front of the school and redecorating the interior of the hall. They introduced a smart uniform for seniors, who had previously been in mufti, and redesigned the junior uniform. A few teachers within the school and others within the AIMHI group were critical of these moves, especially of the changes to the physical environment. The assumption was that the appearance of the school and the students' uniforms was not contributing to student achievement in any way. The data collected from the students suggested otherwise. The following quotes were typical of the many comments they made: *It feels like we go to a real school now; It* (the senior uniform) *makes us walk taller; We can feel proud now when we go out, especially when we are with other schools; We feel better about ourselves.* By the end of the year, it was clear that these changes were symbols of positive shifts in the culture of the school.

Giving students a voice

An important feature of the AIMHI research has been the group discussions with students. The students have proved to be very insightful and wise in describing their experiences and identifying their needs. The research has given them a rare opportunity, in a safe and independent forum, to express themselves honestly without fear of compromising their relationship with their teachers or with senior staff. In return, the students' voices give the data a credibility and urgency that is very powerful and difficult to ignore. There is ample evidence of student feedback having a profound effect on the some of the changes made. At one school, student reports of wagging, time wasting between periods and, in particular, of not having a base they felt they 'owned', prompted the setting up of home rooms for all of the junior classes. This means that students stay in the same room with their own desk for all their subjects, unless a specialist room or space is required. At another school, as part of an overhaul of the behaviour management system, the student code of conduct was rewritten, with student input, after they made it clear that the old code was wordy, cumbersome and hardly ever referred to by staff or students. The detention system was also modified to ensure that students no longer referred to it as *a joke*.

Gaining the informed consent of parents and caregivers to permit their children to participate remains an ongoing issue for the researchers. It is complicated by the large numbers of parents and caregivers involved (approximately 4,500) and because many of them speak languages other than English. At the beginning of the study, letters were sent out in all the main languages to every parent and they were given the opportunity to withdraw their child's name from being included in the group discussions. Only one parent requested such a withdrawal but the researchers were very aware that not all parents and students would fully understand the research process. Now that more of the schools are using AIMHI funding to post their newsletters home, the schools and the researchers have an ideal vehicle for keeping parents more informed about the Project, the research process and for gaining ongoing informed consent. This year, the newsletters

were used to repeat the informed consent process employed at the beginning of the study.

Great care is still taken by the researchers to explain the relevant parts and purpose of the research methodology at the beginning of every group discussion with students and to seek their permission to take part. The size of the groups allows any student to stay silent and they are encouraged to do so if they are feeling uncomfortable about making a contribution.

Clarifying the 'big picture'

The research has also been able to provide an important 'big picture' for some of the schools. This 'big picture' has generally emerged from piecing data together over time, from a range of sources and by exploring a range of aspects of life in the school. In one school, during a particularly tense time in its change process, the researcher was able to describe elements of the school's culture that were promoting positive changes and those aspects that were making it difficult for the changes to be implemented. At a staff meeting, the data were presented in a 'force field' format. Up until that point, each staff member had only been concerned with the particular issues that directly affected him or her and were too immersed in the situation to be able to see the bigger picture. The diagram pulled all the issues together, placed them in a context and 'greased the wheels' for the change process to continue.

Some critical success factors

Critical to the process of providing ongoing feedback is the **rapport, trust and respect** that develops between the researchers and personnel within the schools. This takes some time to build and when, inevitably, there are changes in personnel, special care needs to be taken to reinvest that time and energy.

The **independence** of the researcher in collecting and analysing the data and in delivering the feedback can make the process safer and more credible for the participants. This is particularly the case if the school is in a fragile position and the change management process is likely to be complex.

As discussed in the previous section, **honesty** has been crucial to a number of significant changes made in the schools. Communication skills and professional judgement are needed in making decisions about who will be involved, what feedback will be given and how it will be delivered.

The **students' voices** add a strong and different dimension to the data that focuses change on meeting student needs. It is essential that students are guaranteed confidentiality and, when appropriate, that outcomes of their input are articulated.

The research data is of most use when the **feedback is given as soon as possible after it has been collected**. The collection of the data itself can

increase the motivation for change and the quick return of feedback helps to ensure that the momentum is maintained.

There are advantages in **accompanying any written research information with verbal feedback**, even when the readers have had opportunities for input into drafts. It provides an opportunity to reinforce the messages and, more importantly, allows for further questioning and clarification. It can also serve to support the participants in identifying possible ways forward.

To implement change takes time, especially if the changes are to become a fully integrated and accepted part of everyday practice in the school. If research is to support this kind of change management, the **feedback loops must be ongoing**, at least until the school is in a position to be self-monitoring. The extent and regularity of the data collection, analysis and feedback needs to be driven by the needs of each of the particular school or programme.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence that when schools have listened to the feedback and then used the data to make changes, they have been able to speed up the change process. With access to data to help them make more informed decisions, they have been able to make changes more quickly and with greater confidence. That feedback, and its independence, was particularly crucial to the schools that were most vulnerable. In other words, where the were a number of major and complex issues to be resolved and where changes needed to be made quickly, the research was more pivotal.

School personnel in the AIMHI schools are, by and large, developing a high degree of openness to feedback. While the schools are aware they are in the spotlight, the confidentiality that surrounds the sharing of research information has created a climate in the schools where participants know it is safe to be honest with the researchers and that this will be reciprocated. School personnel now know that none of the details will surface in the public arena where they might damage the school in an unhelpful and destructive way. They also know the researchers will give full and honest feedback even if the messages are not positive. In Pat Wolfe's (1995) words:

> *Dancers have mirrors. Where are our mirrors? The light in the eyes of the students is not enough.*

For the AIMHI schools, the research has been the mirror.