**Transferring a Model of School Improvement from England to Iceland**


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The paper describes a two years experience of transferring the English school improvement model *Improving the Education for All – IQEA* to Iceland. It deals with the transfer of the model, the impact on the schools, some impediments to progress and the need for further adaptation.

**Introduction**

The importance of educational change is now well established and regarded as a priority throughout the world. Educational change has various aims. One is to raise standards of performance while other aims are more concerned with the needs of individuals and society.

Various strategies are used to improve schools. Many governments have launched nation wide reform initiatives for that purpose. Well known examples of this are local management of schools, national curricula, teacher appraisal, school based evaluation, development planning and inspections.

School improvement as a body of research and an approach to educational change has over the last two decades been established as an international academic field. School improvement has ‘the twin goals of enhancing students outcomes as well as strengthening the schools capacity for managing change’ (Hopkins 1991, p.2). In order to accomplish these goals, school improvement
focuses on the processes through which schools have to go and the internal conditions they have to create to become more successful and sustain their success. One of the most important assumptions on which the approach is based is that each school has to make sense of external reforms and adapt them to its own unique context. To do so the school has to create a culture that is supportive of improvement, is based on involvement and collaboration of teachers, empowers them and gives them ownership over the process.

Until recently the Icelandic school system was not subject to great demands for reform. Apart from a long tradition of a rather flexible national curriculum and national testing in four core subjects by the end of the compulsory school (year 10) schools have been very much left on their own in their efforts to provide education for their pupils. This however has gradually been changing. Individual schools have initiated a number of development projects, some of which have been run in collaboration with the University College of Education in Reykjavik. Two development and research funds, both established in the late ‘80s, have promoted these development efforts: one established by the Ministry of Education and the other by the Teachers’ Union of Iceland. Considerable amounts of money have come into individual schools through these funds. Few of these development projects have been whole school projects and the schools have also had limited access to consultation and guidance. The general impact of these projects on schools has not been systematically evaluated and in fact very little is known about their sustained impact on individual schools or the school system in general.

A new legislation from 1995 for the compulsory school introduces some steps, albeit short, towards more external pressure on schools and national strategies for school improvement. The most radical change is ‘community management’ of schools which devolves both financial and educational responsibilities directly to the local community councils and individual schools. In addition it requires schools to establish their own strategies for self – evaluation and draw up a policy document, usually referred to as the ‘school curriculum’, stating how the school intends to set about implementing the National Curriculum. It also requires schools to make their own plans for staff development. In our minds, however, these innovations do not reach far enough to constitute a coherent framework for improvement, nor do they represent a coherent national policy for the quality of education in Icelandic schools. And even if they did, the Ministry of Education does not seem to have any particular strategies for implementing these changes or evaluating them.
**Improving the Quality of Education for All - IQEA**

**The IQEA model**

The IQEA model was initiated by a group of tutors at the Cambridge University School of Education in collaboration with schools and local authorities in London and East Anglia (Hopkins *et al.* 1996). The model is based on the authors’ experience of working with schools, as well as their own re-conceptualisation of the notion of a ‘successful’ school.

The model builds on a series of assumptions (see Ainscow *et al.* 1994; Hopkins *et al.* 1994; 1996):

- School improvement will result in enhanced outcomes for students and staff. Outcomes are defined broadly and the experience schools have to offer their students is not less regarded than are statistically measurable outcomes.

- Schools need to create a culture that is supportive of improvement. Vital dimensions of such cultures are collaboration, empowerment of individual and groups, high expectations for both students and staff and consensus of values and visions for the school.

- School improvement aims at creating a set of conditions within the school. As can be seen in *Figure 1* these conditions relate to the organisational structure and management of the school as well as classroom practice.

- School improvement is a strategy to work on these conditions and the schools own priorities for improvement at the same time. External pressure for change will provide opportunities for schools to secure their own priorities for development.

- Priorities arise from the school’s own evaluation of its current practice and the need for development. Monitoring and evaluation of quality are regarded as shared responsibility of all staff. Priorities should:
  - be few in number
  - be central to the mission of the school
  - relate to current agenda
  - link to teaching and learning
  - lead to specific outcomes.
Figure 1. The IQEA model

The IQEA in Iceland

The IQEA project in Iceland commenced in four schools in North East Iceland in September 1995. The aim was to introduce a model of school improvement that was coherent and whole school focused, promoted school based evaluation and was well equipped for evaluation of its impact on schools. The project was run in close consultation with Cambridge University School of Education with Mel West as the main contact person. The authors of this paper led the project and
acted as consultants with individual schools. The project was evaluated by two members of staff at the University College of Education in Reykjavik.

A formal contract was made with each school. The decision to join the project was made by consultation amongst all staff and a minimum of 75% participation of teachers was required. The schools allocated substantial staff development time to activities related to the program, sometimes in their classrooms.

Each school designated three to four members of staff as project co-ordinators, known as the ‘cadre group’. The head or the deputy head was always a member of the group. The cadre group was responsible for the day to day running of the project; acted as a link between the consultants and the staff and led the work within the school. The schools were encouraged to work on the management arrangements during the first year and create the classroom conditions during the second year. The conditions were addressed accordingly in 6 day long workshops each year, which the four cadres attended.

The consultants regularly visited each school, mainly to discuss their progress with the cadre group, take stock, and plan ahead, but also to see the school in action, talk with other staff and pupils or work with the staff group on activities, give lectures or discuss the work. Throughout the second year the consultants also provided substantial consultation for individual teachers who were adopting new teaching methods.

**The IQEA project in Iceland: Some observations**

**The impact on the schools**

The four Icelandic IQEA schools differed in various ways. The smallest of them, with about 60 pupils on roll, serves a small fishing village and a surrounding agricultural area. The biggest is a village school with about 450 pupils. The other two are rural. From the beginning the work in each school was also different in terms of degree of commitment, allocation of time, momentum of the work, choice of priorities and so on. There were also notable parallels: All of the schools had to find their own ways of collecting and interpreting data, selecting priorities, making and implementing action plans, monitoring progress and making the necessary alterations to their plans. All this required new practices, new attitudes and a different nature of discussions among staff. Travelling through
this unfamiliar territory created a fair amount of uncertainty within the school communities which all of them needed time and effort to overcome.

What impact, then, did the two years participation in the project have on the four schools? We are fully aware that no conclusions can yet be drawn about the long term impact of the project. However, by the end of our two years journey with the schools, we are able to draw the following conclusions. They are based on evidence from our own observations within the schools; questionnaires completed by teachers and parents and semi-structured interviews with individual teachers, cadre groups, heads and a few groups of pupils from each school.

- All the schools do more planning than they used to do before with regard to school development planning, staff development planning and improved lesson plans.
- All the schools make better use of existing data and use more effective methods gathering new data. They all use self-evaluation to some extent, either to discover weak areas needing attention or as a part of a planning cycle.
- The schools seem to have a somewhat stronger vision and improved co-ordination of staff. This has evolved through collaboration and structured staff discussions.
- The project has enabled both teachers and heads to participate in discussions that have increased their professional vocabulary and heightened their self-esteem.
- The schools have changed their approach to staff development. They are more aware of the necessity of making staff development policies that directly address the needs and priorities of the school, and the advantages of in-school staff development programs.
- There are examples of changes in the assessment and recording of pupils’ performance, and more frequent and accurate the feedback to parents.
- A considerable number of teachers added co-operative learning to their repertoire.
- There are examples of new promising forms of liaison with parents.
- There were examples of whole school behaviour policies and new procedures for dealing with behaviour management with encouraging result in some cases.
- Groups of pupils experienced change through e.g.: co-operative learning; peer tutoring; cross-curriculum programs; improved balance between working methods; increased opportunities for expression and critical thinking, but fewer ditto sheets.
Impediments to progress

As could be expected a number of factors facilitated the implementation of the model, whilst others impeded it. All the schools were enthusiastic about participating in the project and welcomed it as an opportunity to improve the quality of their provision for pupils. In all the schools the project was led by committed, progressive teachers and heads who made every effort to promote success, and in all of them the vast majority of the teachers actively participated in it, bringing to it their, professional knowledge, experience and expertise.

However, the journey was not without complications, and in the following sections of this chapter we will address some of the most important:

Our two years experience of the IQEA strongly confirms the importance of effective leadership by both the head and the deputy head. So does our general experience of working as consultants with Icelandic schools. In the light of this we make three comments: First, Icelandic head teachers, whilst very efficient in their administrative roles, do not seem to have equally well established roles as educational leaders. Second, and as a result of the first, few schools seem to have agreed visions and policies of classroom practice. This is perhaps not surprising in the light of the unclear national educational policy noted in the introduction of this paper. Third, there is a strong tradition of autonomy of classroom practice for individual teachers who, as a result, are not used to conform to agreed visions and policies of classroom practice, even if they exist. All these factors relate directly to the internal conditions the project seeks to create, and being weak they inevitably slowed down the momentum of the schools, especially during the first year.

Related to the issue of leadership is the function of the cadre groups. The main purpose of creating them is to extend and distribute leadership and responsibilities more effectively within the school. Weak traditions of transformational leadership and empowerment of teachers seemed to create insecurity for the cadre groups about their roles which took considerable time for some of them to overcome.

Schools are often referred to as ‘loosely coupled systems’ (see e.g. Hoyle 1986) where individuals and departments tend to work in isolation from each other. One of the most important aims of the IQEA is to overcome this isolation by building a culture of involvement and collaboration and strategies for co-
ordination. There is not generally a strong tradition for collaboration between teachers in Icelandic schools. Moreover, the contracts, under which Icelandic teachers work, are unfavourable of collaboration as they draw a sharp distinction between teaching and preparation and encourage the latter to take place outside the school and consequently in isolation from colleagues, and without any direction from the head.

As noted in the introduction to this paper Icelandic schools have not until very recently been subject to much external pressure to change. The model has therefore served Icelandic schools as a means of getting started on internally initiated change, whilst it has served English schools more as an aid to finding their bearings in the turmoil of external pressures and top-down government initiated change. It seems reasonable to assume that in the absence of external pressure and accountability the less enthusiastic teachers are likely to question the necessity of getting involved in a whole school project like IQEA, which again will lower their commitment.

Related to this lack of accountability, but blended with the fact that change is often emotionally demanding, was what we prefer to call ‘avoidance syndrome’. This was reflected in teachers repeatedly retreating from earlier agreements and plans, or trying to find loopholes in their work contracts, when faced with immediate action.

IQEA looks at school based enquiry and reflection and development planning as two sides of the same coin and is intended to strengthen both sides. In the absence of established methods of systematic collection and interpretation of data and subsequent development planning schools will inevitably need considerable time to build their capacity for effective practice in this field.

Conclusions and implications for further development

The experience and evaluation of our two years journey with the four IQEA schools allows us to draw the following conclusions:

The IQEA model seems well suitable for Icelandic schools. The internal conditions the project aims to create are fully relevant and constitute favourable cultural changes, likely to improve the schools’ provision for all pupils.

All the schools benefited in various ways from their participation in the project and finish their two years journey with a strong intention to carry on. The
complications discussed above seem to relate to the specific Icelandic context and school culture, rather than being inherent in the model itself. For future work this specific context needs to be taken into account in the following ways:

- Two years are not enough time to create and sustain the necessary conditions within the schools. Therefore we feel necessary to add a third year to the contract with schools.
- In their work with schools, consultants need to pay special attention to enquiry, planning, collaboration and leadership, at school and classroom level.
- We feel that schools should be encouraged to choose priorities that relate directly to classroom practice earlier in the process. Such priorities are likely to result in earlier visible success, and thereby enhance teacher commitment and prevent enthusiastic teachers from losing interest in the early months of the project when progress is quite often slow. The possibility of pairing the management and classroom conditions and working on them simultaneously should also be considered.
- The function of the cadre groups has to be more clearly defined from the outset. This relates to leadership roles of the cadre group members themselves, processes of delegation, co-ordination and communication between them and the rest of the staff.
- Where either the head or the deputy head is not a member of the cadre group, actions need to be taken to ensure communication and prevent him/her from becoming semi-detached from the project.
- The consultants need to provide more assistance for cadre groups transferring the out of school training sessions to the rest of the teachers. This would also have the positive by-effects of making the consultants more visible to all staff.
- Finally, in our opinion, closer attention has to be paid to the ‘human factor’ – the feelings of those involved in an improvement venture like the IQEA. Every strategy for implementing an improvement model has to take into account the importance of feelings like stress, anxiety, avoidance, self-esteem, commitment, satisfaction, humour and joy. All these are vital elements of the vital link between theory and practice, between planning and implementation and for the life of a moving school.

To summarise, we believe that The IQEA model, with our suggested amendments, can make a powerful improvement tool for Icelandic schools. It offers a strong alternative to the somewhat fragmented and isolated nature of too many development efforts. Moreover, it seems well suited to help schools to respond to growing external pressure for reform, and to integrate external requirements into the schools’ existing culture and relate it to every school’s major aims of pupil achievement.
References


