CHAPTER 5

IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Impact driven professional development can lead to a narrow learning experience for education professionals and for children, if implemented carefully, however, it has the potential to lead to an inclusive approach to teaching and learning that works towards ensuring that every child’s learning needs are addressed. This inclusive approach to practice in education underpins and is key to the success of the model presented in this book, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Current literature and research on the impact of professional development, however, highlights the difficulties we face in ensuring that professional development has an impact on young people’s learning and raises many questions about how we can improve the educational experience of young people through the professional development of the education workforce. One of the ways in which we can improve their experiences is to ensure that professional learning has a measurable impact and this chapter and Chapter 6 examine what this means for education professionals and their pupils. This chapter explores the current political and economic climate in which interest in impact is visible in every area of education, highlighting the positive outcomes and also the dangers. It raises questions about the control of professional development and examines previous research to ask why we should measure impact and how this links to effective professional development.

MEASURING IMPACT

The issue of measuring impact and providing evidence of the effectiveness of educational activity is currently, as mentioned above, of great political and economic interest. For some time schools in the state sector in England have had to provide evidence of the effect of education provision on pupils. However, the requirement to measure impact takes this a stage further across a range of education activity, for example, the new format of the Research Excellence Framework in the UK, which will assess the quality of research undertaken by university staff now requires evidence of the impact of research. There is not only concern relating to value for the money invested in research, but there is also interest in the effectiveness and influence of the research conducted in higher education. Another example of this may be found in a national post-graduate professional development programme in England, which requires evidence of impact as a criterion for award and continued funding by the Government, an issue which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Other examples of concern about, and interest in, impact include large-scale surveys undertaken by the Government to assess the effectiveness of education, for example the Newly
Qualified Teacher Survey and the National Student Survey. Results from both surveys are published nationally and used by the media, independent analysts and Government agencies to assess the impact of provision. The language used in education is also symbolic of the interest in impact; evidence, performance (management), inspection, review and audit have all become familiar elements of the policy language and rhetoric used to examine effectiveness.

Value for Money and Accountability

Policy interest in impact appears to have two driving forces, which, while they can be examined separately, are also closely related, they are value for money and accountability. In relation to ‘value for money’ the current economic climate is clearly highly influential and while this is of relatively recent political and policy interest in relation to professional development, it is feasible to assume that it will remain of concern for the foreseeable future. However, as discussed later in this chapter, in a section on the control of professional development, the issue of accountability has been with us, and has been growing in momentum, for several decades. Apple (2009) identifies a combination of three elements of influence, which can be seen to affect the way education is funded, provided and evaluated, which are useful in examining current imperatives around impact. Firstly, he identifies neo-liberals, who believe that private is necessarily good and public necessarily bad, as influential in the changing scenario of the management and funding of schools and learning centres. Secondly, neo-conservatives who wish for a return to discipline and tradition in schools are influential in changes to the curriculum and educational outcomes. Thirdly, there is the influence of the professional and managerial middle class, which could also be seen as neo-liberalism; this group is committed to an audit culture, wants to measure efficiency, hold employees accountable and requires the constant production of evidence. While the final influence is clearly related to the demand for evidence of impact, each strand of influence is visible in education today and the first two influences affect who the education professionals are, how they are supported, the expectations placed on them and the culture in which they work.

As suggested above, value for money and accountability are not mutually exclusive when considering impact and the TDA’s priorities for the professional development of the children’s workforce in England (2009–2012) demonstrate this by bringing the two issues together in one of three priorities identified to improve quality and capacity: “All professional development [should be/ will be] judged and evaluated on its impact on children and young people and value for money…” (p.13). While the need for a link between professional development and pupils’ learning and the need to ensure value for money has been identified (Ofsted, 2006), apart from in a minority of programmes, the impact of professional development has largely gone unchecked. Pedder et al., (2008) found that most school leaders, in considering impact, assess the extent to which activities address immediate school needs, collaborative working and the provision of new information as outcomes of professional development providing value for money. However, in a different