

Leading ICT in Schools - It's Not All About The Technology

Changing little things with a view to making a big difference in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Leadership

In recent times, the importance of ICT in society has grown exponentially, with the computer becoming an almost essential element of modern living. Congruently, the evolution of the computer as a learning tool has been equally impressive, moving from Apple Macs, multimedia and computer labs to interactive whiteboards, on-line learning communities and virtual learning environments. However, as pointed out by Keane (2008), the role of Information and Communications Technology leader is becoming increasingly complex, technical and curriculum-focussed, demanding a much broader understanding of ICT in a teaching and learning context than ever before. Inevitably, she suggests, the absence of an effective ICT school leader, or even the presence of a previously pioneering leader whose skills and knowledge-base have been overtaken by the speed of ICT developments, has meant that some schools are failing to utilise ICT as effectively as others with some schools becoming over-reliant on ICT technicians. This article suggests development and support of effective ICT school leaders should represent the cornerstone for any successful ICT policy in Irish education.

From Vision to Action

While international measures to incorporate ICT into education vary, Department of Education and Science (DES) efforts to promote ICT in Irish education have previously resulted in a number of initiatives such as *Computers in Education*, *IT 2000*, *Blueprint for the Future of ICT in Irish Education* and the establishment of the *National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE)*. While many of these initiatives produced initial short term gains such as dedicated ICT advisors, an uptake on computer courses among teachers, a lowering of pupil:computer ratios and ultimately the roll-out of broadband to schools, it is probably fair to say that the majority of these gains have lacked an element of sustainability. In fact, assertions have recently been made that, when compared with other European countries, Ireland has begun to lag behind. It is claimed that there has been a discrete lack of investment in ICT, that Irish students have far less access to computers and broadband connectivity than students of similar age in other developed countries and that many schools remain reluctant to embrace the use of technology in their classrooms at a meaningful level (OECD: 2006). However, rather than simply adopting a 'blank cheque' approach to finding a solution, recent research increasingly promotes a focus on enhanced ICT leadership as a key component of any successful ICT integration policy, suggesting that money spent on ICT in schools is futile unless it is coupled with discrete investment in ICT leadership. Recent DES and Inspectorate strategy documents, such as *Investing Effectively in Information and Communications Technology in Schools, 2008 – 2013* (DES, 2008) and *ICT in Schools: Inspectorate*

Evaluation Studies (DES, 2008) would also appear to acknowledge the importance of leadership. Some of the key investment goals put forward by these reports include –

- ✓ The provision of an appropriate ICT infrastructural configuration and technical services in each school;
- ✓ The support of leadership, ingenuity, creativity and vision for ICT integration in schools;
- ✓ The provision of programmes to meet teachers' ICT professional development needs to support the development of school-wide ICT capacity;
- ✓ The provision of on-demand access to curriculum-relevant digital content and tools;
- ✓ The provision of robust and adequate levels of broadband internet to all schools;

(DES, 2008)

While the strategy groups involved in the compilation of these reports are to be commended for highlighting the overriding issues in ICT, it could be argued that many of the core ideals put forward in these documents have been obvious to key stakeholders across the education system for many years. Nonetheless, if these ideas and goals are so obvious, why then is it taking so long for them to be achieved? This is the key question for the future development of ICT and one which this article attempts to address. An overview of policies, past and present, would suggest that the failure of ICT to embed itself in teaching and learning is not that the goals are misplaced, but rather that the intended means by which these goals are to be achieved is misguided. The assertion, which is outlined below, is that any approach for future ICT development should rest heavily on a combination of two factors: developing positive leadership and encouraging a 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000), both of which are closely intertwined.

Leading Learning

The idea of positive leadership as a key component to the success of any organisation has been recognised for some time. In recent years however there is growing acceptance, both at national and international educational levels, that the quality of educational leadership is paramount in determining the quality of school life. Individual teachers are primarily responsible for children's learning. However, it is widely acknowledged that goal setting, resource provision and staff development are greatly enhanced by supportive leadership structures. Essentially, effective leadership involves having a sense of direction, articulating the vision, leading by example, monitoring situations and providing opportunities to share the ensuing intellectual capital. At a national level, the ICT leadership process is greatly hampered by the lack of statutory power afforded to NCTE. While no one would question NCTE's knowledge, commitment or ability to articulate the vision, the cloud of uncertainty

in which it is forced to operate has undoubtedly hampered its sterling efforts to effectively deliver sustainable change. This atmosphere invariably filters through to local level, and school leaders, who are key catalysts for change in schools, can often feel shackled by a lack of policy, funding or guidance. So how can we change this? What do we do that is different?

One possible strategy requires a close analysis of Gladwell's conceptual theory, *The Tipping Point*. In 2000, Gladwell hypothesised that by analysing ideas under a strict set of criteria, it is easier to see why certain trends can cross a threshold and take off, while others are doomed to failure. He refers to three specific rules – *The Law of the Few*, *the Stickiness Factor* and *the Power of Context*, as key components of any successful breakthrough, all of which are directly influenced by those in leadership roles. It would seem that these rules are easily transferable to ICT in Irish education.

Developing ICT Leadership

Gladwell's first rule, *The Law of the Few*, states that in any effort to promote a particular idea or trend, there is little or no advantage in attempting to convert the masses and even suggests that such an approach is counterproductive. By attempting to convince everyone, any structural impediments and an inability to get general agreement will immediately hamper the delivery of the desired message. In its place, Gladwell advocates the use of 'connectors', a group of key people who have access to and influence over a great many others. In Irish educational terms, one could imply that those best positioned to fulfil this role are school leaders. This core group of individuals should be encouraged to lead by example, and as Albert Schweitzer suggests, example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing. Through already existing support structures, namely Leadership Development for Schools (LDS), courses such as *Misneach* and *Tóraíocht* can assist leaders to develop an ability to become acutely aware of their particular situation, to access the knowledge required to enhance their situations and to identify the means by which they should act. Current practice in Irish schools is far from ideal, as individual schools are currently only managing the situation and ensuring that things work as smoothly as possible in relation to ICT. Ultimately, if the leader of the organisation remains unsure about where he/she is going, every road will lead nowhere (Kissinger, 2006). By placing an extended emphasis on ICT, LDS working in partnership with NCTE, are in an ideal position to provide school leaders with knowledge, direction and positive bias in ICT, and by helping to ensure that this bias filters through to staff, a shared sense of vision could fast develop across all sections of a school environment, not just in ICT terms. A *Value for Money Review of ICT* (DES, 2008) has unwittingly acknowledged this pillar of Gladwell's approach, suggesting that the resources previously utilised by the ICT Advisory Service would be better deployed through an alternative arrangement that focused on developing ICT leadership. This, coupled with a reinvigoration of commitment and status to bodies such as LDS, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the NCTE, could help to solidify efforts and draw ICT leadership out of the doldrums. However, it has also been acknowledged that a sole

focus on leadership is not a sufficient factor on its own. That is why Gladwell's other rules, the *Stickiness Factor* and the *Power of Context*, are equally as important.

It's a Matter of Tactics

According to the DES, the overriding objective of any strategy for ICT in education should be to promote the meaningful use of ICT in schools and to encourage pupils to achieve computer literacy i.e. the necessary skills for participation in an Information Society (DES, 2008). Since its inception, ICT has always been advocated as a means of supporting other curricular areas and was never encouraged as a subject in itself (NCCA, 1990). This hypothesis relates directly to Gladwell's second rule, the *Stickiness Factor*. All too often, Gladwell states, there are innovative and creative trends which fail to tip and that they simply sail in one ear and out the other. He reasons that regardless of the quality of an idea, the message itself can be lost or tipped based on a few simple criteria, namely presentation, structure or tactics. It has to be acknowledged that the overall goals for ICT in Irish education i.e. *Investing Effectively in Information and Communications Technology in Schools, 2008 – 2013*, are to be commended. However, in following Gladwell's theory, a problem is rarely going to arise in the overall concept phase but rather in the promotion of tactics phase. This is a point reiterated by Nelson Mandela, often acknowledged as one of the greatest leaders of our time, who stated that "any issue is not a matter of principle; it is a matter of tactics" (Mandela, 2008). Building on this argument, the focus during the Stickiness Factor stage should move away from building the vision and setting direction, and move towards a focus on understanding the people and developing the idea through teaching and learning. The fundamental dynamic here is to ensure that the vision or message which has been expertly developed is not lost to the intended audience. While the promotion of ICT, in particular as a medium for teaching and learning, has occasionally been met with fear, resistance and even loathing, it is often felt that the line between hostility and acceptance is narrower than people think. If the potential development of ICT competence among principals was embraced, and should they be empowered to lead by example, the goal of encouraging ICT use among teachers should, hypothetically, be considerably easier. All that is required is courage – not just from school leaders but from everyone. Gladwell suggests that connectors (in this case a school leader) can often overcome any difficulties by having the courage to promote ideas that inspire others to action. On the other hand, to continue presenting ICT as a quick fix solution, an add-on at the end of in-service training or a one-size-fits-all model simply will not succeed. It is widely acknowledged that the hard-sell does not work. Schools and individuals need to be presented with tangible examples of how ICT can make a difference to the lives of schools, how these benefits might enhance a school and how a school might access the structures needed to set the wheels in motion.

Improving the Context

Finally, Gladwell hypothesises (via his third rule) that an acute awareness of a leader's own context can be fundamental in influencing how decisions are made regarding the promotion of the ICT. Gladwell suggests that encouraging or assisting people to change their behaviour often hinges on the smallest details of their surroundings and that the impetus to engage in a particular behaviour, such as the promotion of ICT, comes not from the person him/herself but rather from the environment in which they are embedded. One counter argument against this hypothesis is that some teachers and leaders do not have the necessary skills and/or lack the confidence to truly embrace ICT. Pfeffer and Sutton (2007) oppose such a viewpoint, suggesting that talent is not fixed unless the individual perceives it to be and that talent can often be dependent on how the person is managed or led. That said, there exists an understandable temptation to plan for the future before we fully understand the present (Abbott, 2001), a criticism which has been directed towards the recently launched 'Smart Schools = Smart Economy' report. To avoid this pitfall, leaders need to be contextually literate (Southworth, 2008). This essentially means being aware of what is current practice, sharing knowledge and ensuring that the school is delivering the best for all involved. Gladwell suggests that what really matters are the finer details, and that tinkering with the smallest of details in the immediate environment can have a knock-on effect in solving the bigger problem. Essentially, it is much easier to develop a shared sense of mission if key issues such as replacement of sub-standard equipment, purchasing of relevant curricular resources, encouraging staff to avail of opportunities for professional development and keeping abreast of innovative practice are all addressed.

Conclusion

A recent analogy describes the role of a school leader as someone who should resemble Michael O'Leary in the office, Supernanny at the Parents' Association meeting, Mickey Harte at school matches, MacGyver in the boiler house and Yogi Bear in the infant classroom (White, 2009). But who is to say that being Bill Gates in front of the computer screen wouldn't reap another set of rewards for schools. While Gladwell's three rules of *The Tipping Point* can seem a little abstract at first glance, their core foundations can be simplified as personal example, high expectations, proper support and a belief that change is possible. These rules have already been applied to a number of social trends across the world and it is easy to see how they could be equally relevant to ICT development in Irish education. Furthermore, the encouragement of adequate numbers of leaders towards this particular path might just lead to the '*The Tipping Point*' that has long been lacking for ICT in Irish education. The benefits that such an occurrence would bring to the professional development of school leaders, the empowerment of teachers, skill levels of pupils and even the competitiveness of Irish society could be enormous.

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