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Leading, managing and sustaining education partnerships: an analysis derived from the perspectives of senior managers of education and training organisations.

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Background

Partnerships amongst education and training organisations have been vigorously promoted in education, as in other policy fields, by national governments, supranational bodies and international organisations (Jones & Bird 2000, CEC 2001, OECD 2000). Partnerships and the process of partnership working are seen as means of achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness in public sector services, and as strategies for tackling challenging educational and social goals, such as raising educational standards and promoting social inclusion (Dickson et al. 2002, Cardini 2006). This policy background provides the context for the research reported in this paper.

Research Questions

The paper discusses the findings of a qualitative study (Mason 2002) of partnership working in the field of post-16 education and training in England. The study focused on the policy and practice of partnership and sought to identify characteristics of partnerships which contribute to their effectiveness and sustainability.

Methods

The research adopted a grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998) and inductively linked characteristics of partnerships found in the partnership literature with empirical data from a case study of a sub-regional partnership of education and training organisations. The literature drew on studies of partnerships in different policy fields including education, health, housing, social and welfare policy, business and international development (Stuart 2002, Balloch & Taylor 2001, Ebers 2001, Tennyson & Wilde 2000). The fieldwork for the case study was undertaken in a sub-region that performs poorly in national measures of educational attainment and contains pockets of economic and social deprivation. During the research period the national government, (New Labour), was using 'carrots and sticks' (Glendinning et al 2002) to encourage, entice, even compel educational organisations to work in 'partnership'. The methods used for data gathering included observations of partnership meetings, use of documentary evidence of partnership working and semi-structured interviews with senior managers with substantial experience of forming, leading and managing education partnerships.

Frame

The literature and empirical data were then synthesised to develop a continuum of characteristics of weak to strong forms of partnership which represent features that can be linked to leading, managing and sustaining partnerships. The notion of a continuum draws on the work of Mullinix (2001) who proposes a continuum for categorising the stages in the development of a partnership and Tett (2003) who suggests that the term 'partnership' applies to a range of activities which involve collaboration amongst individuals and organisations.

Research findings

The characteristic features in the continuum of weak to strong forms of partnership are the main findings presented in this paper. These features include different types and levels of trust, social networks and the varying network structures which underpin partnership working, individual and

organisational commitment to shared norms and values and motivations for participation in a partnership. The research data shows that partnership is a complex and heterogeneous concept that depends upon establishing, managing and maintaining relationships amongst individuals, organisations and agencies with different organisational cultures, varying levels of power and multiple reasons for participation in a specific partnership. Both structures and people play important roles in ensuring that a partnership works effectively and dimensions of social capital, such as trust, networks, norms and values (Field & Schuller 2000, Field 2003, Dhillon 2009) are significant characteristics of sustained partnerships.