0471

'Virtuous triangles' for curriculum innovation and pupil participation: supporting school-based action research through Local Authority and HEI collaboration

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Background

In collaboration, a University Faculty of Education and the Learning Group (Advisory Service) of a large Local Authority in England have supported action research projects in 13 primary, secondary and special schools. These projects involve teachers in leading curriculum innovation and increasing pupil participation and voice. There have been opportunities for powerful collaborative professional learning within schools and across the project. All schools have included the dimension of pupil participation, either as the main focus or as an integral aspect of curriculum development. The research reports on the initial outcomes and impact of this pilot project.

It is increasingly evident that 'serial innovation' and large scale reform cannot close the achievement gap and may in fact be limiting educational and social development (MacBeath, 2010), therefore increasingly we need to look to smaller-scale, practitioner-led, inclusive approaches that recognise the uniqueness of local contexts and the role of teachers, pupils and others in directing, shaping and evaluating change. This collaborative project reflects findings of research on CPD that has greatest effect on children's and young people's learning (Cordingley et al., 2003), in terms of being practitioner-led, collaborative, sustained over time and involving appropriate specialist support. It revisits the notion of teachers as leaders of curriculum development (Stenhouse, 1975) and adopts an inclusive approach to change (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Research Questions

The research examines the effectiveness of the collaboration between the school, the HEI and the Local Authority through an examination of case studies of each school based project within an overarching case study of the pilot across 13 schools. It is recognised that a practitioner action research approach with pupil involvement is by no means new, however the nature of such an approach demands a research stance with a case-specific methodology on the part of external facilitators as well as school participants, to contribute insights about effective ways of supporting innovation and change in the individual organisational and general socio-political context.

Methods

An evaluative or 'instrumental' case study approach is adopted (Stenhouse, 1985; Stake 1995) for the over-arching evaluation of the pilot project. For each school a range of data sources is available, including documentary materials, records of meetings with Local Authority and University partners, practitioners' journals and records of semi-structured interviews with a range of participants, including pupils. A 'layered' approach to the case study is adopted. Teacher leaders gather evidence of process, outcomes and impact in the course of their action research (Durrant and Holden, 2006), in some cases working in collaboration with pupil researchers (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Essex County Council, 2009). Tutors and advisers gather additional evidence relating to participants' professional development, collaborative learning across the project and perceptions of impact in schools. This gives the pilot project a methodological integrity (as modelled by Cremin et al, 2008). All strands and layers of the enquiry are drawn together in a conference at the end of the pilot study.

Frame

Each school setting is regarded as a distinct case, and the criteria for outcomes and impact are context specific, working within a framework with the broad headings of pupil learning; professional learning; organisation learning; network / system / community learning (Frost and Durrant, 2002). The analysis seeks to identify the factors that have contributed to, or hindered, the achievement of the school's intended outcomes, with specific reference to any 'value added' dimension resulting from the LA - University partnership.

Research findings

The research reported in this paper enables the Local Authority to consider how best to support school innovation, professional development and pupil participation and informs future University - LA collaboration. It examines the extent to which these 'virtuous triangles' supporting school-based action research

a) have an impact on children's and young people's learning, including aspects such as motivation, confidence, participation and wellbeing as well as achievement

b) contribute to organisational improvement, e.g. in developing a more inclusive culture (Ainscow, 2006) and a more relevant and engaging curriculum

c) result in professional development as an outcome for teachers and other participants including advisers and academics, with development of knowledge and skills that might now be applied elsewhere.