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The Southampton Music Action Research Project: the second year

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Background

The Southampton Music Action Research Project is a three-year action research study which aims to investigate how music teachers use action research as a means of improving class music teaching in Secondary schools. The first year of the project engaged ten teachers from the Southampton area, and the research questions were, 'How do teachers undertake action research in music education?' and, 'What knowledge is created in the process?' This exploratory work was reported at the Annual Conference of the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, where it was awarded the UCET 2009 Prize for research in teacher education. The second year of the project is reported in this paper.

Research Questions

There are few music teachers in most Secondary schools (sometimes only one or two) and they can see themselves as isolated. In the first year of the project the teachers' research had not generally been collaborative and, in the second year I wanted to encourage teachers to take a more collaborative approach to action research. In my representations of action research I stressed the collaborative nature of the research, hoping that teachers would involve their students and colleagues more in making decisions about the research. I also set up a blog, so that teachers in different schools could communicate with each other. The principal research question was, 'How do Secondary school music teachers use collaborative approaches, when they undertake action research?'

Methods

On the first day I presented the action research spiral to the teachers and explained my understanding of how action research differs from other types of research. I asked them to read texts about action research, including McNiff (2002) and Somekh (2006). Thus it is likely that their understanding of action research was shaped by my understanding, through my presentation, the texts I chose and our discussions.

Thereafter, project teachers planned and implemented projects in their own schools. I made visits to all schools, in order to discuss the projects and some schools were also visited by an LA music adviser, for the same purpose. Teachers attended the university to discuss their projects with each other, to present their projects, and to respond to each others' presentations. I transcribed these and uploaded them to a website.

The data I collected to analyse the projects included teachers' entries into the project's blog, transcripts of their presentations, individual and group interviews, and individual questionnaires. Following their publication on the project website I analysed the reports, sent the analysis to the teachers for checking and edited them when the teachers requested this. An ethical code of conduct was observed; for example, teachers were informed that their work was part of an action research study, were given control of all aspects of their projects, were encouraged to enter their work onto the project's website and were given editorial control of the site.

Frame

The understanding of action research employed by this project is that teachers' classroom-based action research is necessarily different from either positivist or interpretive research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Such research is 'insider' research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) which means that, when

teachers observe something in their teaching, they are bringing considerable experiential knowledge to bear on the phenomenon, in order to understand it. It also means that teachers cannot study their own teaching using perspectives drawn from 'outsider' research; teachers' classroom-based action research inevitably involves an element of self-study (Noffke, 1997). This theoretical framework is used on two levels. I have communicated it to the teachers in the project, to guide the conduct of their work and, at another level, I have used it in relation to my own research approach.

Research findings

There was more collaboration in the second year of the project than the first, probably due to the way in which I taught. However, this was not consistent across all projects. Teachers employed different modes of collaboration:

1. the teacher collaborated with the students;
2. two or more teachers collaborated with each other, to provide change for students;
3. teachers in different schools entered into conversation with each other to discuss what they were doing in their schools;

There is some evidence that the first mode of collaboration involves teachers setting aside some power differentials, in order to negotiate matters around the curriculum with their students. Nevertheless, it is seen as the most useful by teachers, whereas the second and third modes are seen as relatively peripheral to the main business of teaching, and can be jettisoned if choices have to be made between the modes of collaboration.