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Designing and managing effective curriculum innovation - A tale of two cases

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Background

This paper will focus on the findings from two multiple-site, multi method case studies of curriculum innovation. The foci for the probes arose from the experiences of Year 2 of a three year curriculum research project. They represented substantive concerns or gaps in the knowledge of practitioners and school leaders, as evidenced by the survey responses and the evidence of the probes carried out that year, and from the systematic review of the evidence regarding how teachers construct challenge.

Research Questions

The two foci were:

Case 1 - How do effective curriculum experiences at important transitions contribute to narrowing achievement gaps for the most vulnerable children and young people?

Case 2 - In schools that are successfully developing the curriculum, how are the changes required by curriculum innovation being managed by school leaders?

Methods

Each case study ran for up to four months across up to six schools and used a mixed method approach which included:

- documentary analysis;
- interviews with school and curriculum leaders;
- analysis of curriculum resources and student work;
- observation of classroom practice;
- focus group interviews with students;
- observation and debriefing of professional learning and curriculum development episodes; and
- group interviews with teachers.

Frame

In each year of the project the 'probes' of what we have theorised as 'propositional' case studies were carried out. These probes were essentially what Mitchell (1983) describes as plausibility probes. His definition of this is based on the work of Eckstein (1975).

'They may constitute part of a series of case studies devoted to the expansion and development of an interpretative schema ...Plausibility probes are used, then, as a preliminary test of theoretical formulations previously established , before a rigorous test by formal procedures.'

We have reformulated this definition with regard to the evidence based curriculum project with the probes acting as a means of providing practitioners the opportunity to check out the plausibility of approaches seen as effective practice, from either the perspective of prior research or innovative practitioners, before they invest their own efforts in 'testing' them out in their own practice. They

therefore occupy a particular place in Mitchell's (1983) discussion of the five different types of case studies each occupying a different point in the articulation of theoretical and generalisable knowledge:

- Configurative-ideographic - basically descriptive
- Disciplined-configurative - theoretically catalytic
- Heuristic - aimed at theory generation
- Plausibility probes - used to test ideas and theories before wide scale testing
- Crucial case studies - allow for the rejection or support of theoretical proposition

Research findings

The findings from Case Study 1 are concentrated around the following questions:

- How do effective teachers accurately diagnose starting points for learners making a transition?
- How do they plan for and deliver personalised progression routes that link to and extend learners' interests?
- How do effective teachers build a broad view of achievement for the most vulnerable children and young people through good assessment practice?

The findings from Case study 2 are concentrated around the following questions:

- How do school and curriculum leaders ensure effective transition between key stages, programmes and courses?
- How do school and curriculum leaders build cross curricular links for e.g. literacy, English and thinking skills?
- How do school and curriculum leaders encourage and support staff to relate classroom learning to real life contexts appropriate to learners' home/community/cultural environments?
- What are the stages of development as the work of school leaders in these areas progresses and becomes embedded?

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