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Symposium

Letting Lead: where do we go from here?

Encouraging shared leadership, participation, agency and voice in improving learning, wellbeing and participation for children and young people.

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Symposium Discussion Framework

From the evidence of our three case studies in ‘letting lead’ to improve learning, wellbeing and participation for children and young people, common process elements identified as factors for success are listed below.

1. Successful partnership working

Trust, mutual respect and open-mindedness, arising from and contributing to a clear purpose, are needed from the outset of planning and development. These bridge the differences in organisational culture and enable participants at both strategic and operational levels to take risks in groundbreaking projects and those that enter new collaborative territory. This requires the building of strong links and sustainable relationships. Practically, protocols must be negotiated for communication and monitoring, while ethnically, it is necessary to develop clear guidelines for activity based on shared vision and values. Such links are fostered by genuinely collaborative development work and a ‘cross fertilization’ of ideas, expertise and ways of working (Zwozdiak-Meyers et al, 2009).

2. Continuing professional development contributing directly to improved student learning

The following elements were identified in a review by Cordingley et al. (2003):
• the use of external expertise linked to school-based activity
• opportunities for teachers to identify their own CPD focus so that they can focus on issues which are important to them;
• processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue
• the use of peer support
• refining reflective processes, particularly through debriefing with HEI support
• processes for sustaining CPD over time to enable teachers to embed the practices in their own classroom settings (Cordingley et al, 2003).

These have been built into the University’s ways of working with teachers and Local Authorities, but with a shift away from ‘professional development’ towards ‘leadership of learning’ supported by enquiry and self-evaluation (see Durrant and Holden, 2006; Durrant, 2007; Frost and Durrant, 2003).

3. Integrated, participative enquiry and self-evaluation to support improvements in learning

The instigation of enquiry that is focussed, planned and undertaken by actors in the situations under investigation, which in our three case studies includes action research, self-evaluation, action learning sets, observation visits and film making, offers a chance to re-focus on learning and on issues and factors concerning learning processes and environments. This may involve evaluating current practices or responding to concerns or problems in constructive ways. Emphasising the qualitative, it offers opportunities for drawing people (teachers, students, parents and others) into meaningful dialogue about learning and hearing their perspectives and ideas (Durrant and Holden, 2006). Enquiry enables the development of better relationships around learning and is itself a learning process. Most importantly, through individual leadership it connects with real change.

Enquiry focuses on the processes or learning and teaching but also investigates leadership, collaboration and school improvement processes. It is significant that the external partners in development projects with schools and Local Authorities are themselves researchers adding another layer of data and understanding.

4. Strategic and practical support to allow time for reflection and collaboration

The factors that hindered development and reduced impact are almost exclusively to do with lack of time, support and commitment. A highly significant factor in this is the extent to which senior leaders in schools and Local Authority / government are committed, both in principle and in practice, to supporting the activity, including giving ‘permission’ for teachers and others to attend meetings, preferably as part of normal work rather than in addition, clearing space and time in school for collaborative working and enabling flexibility with curriculum and work schedules. ‘Letting go’ under the guise of allowing people autonomy and giving them...
responsibility in research and development by removing structures and support (thereby saving time and money) is a false economy. Full commitment and participation in whole group events and regular timetabled activity in the school or other setting was not only desirable but necessary on the part of all participants. Without this, impact was considerably limited.

5. Open dialogue at the heart of leadership and learning

Open dialogue is valued not only for the opportunity for critical reflection but also because it ‘finds lost voices’, enabling teachers, students and schools better to know themselves (Zwozdiak-Myers et al., 2009). The focus on children and young people’s learning, participation and wellbeing is crucial. Opening the dialogue – enabling everyone to have a voice not only in contributing to the agenda but in shaping that agenda - allows individuals to make meaning of their lives and situations. It enables people’s commitment to have a more powerful impact on children’s outcomes, because it allows teachers, school leaders and others involved in education and the wider ‘children’s services’ to reconnect with their core values and reawaken their desire to make a difference. Open dialogue also includes authentic political work to confront challenges and develop strategies that would work within the organisational environments of their schools.

6. A discourse of impact

Impact lies at the heart of the school improvement work in the case studies. Impact not only involves outputs such as professional learning for adult participants, new ways of working, changed structures and relationships, but must also include following this through to identify and evidence improvements in students’ learning. In all our case studies, these improvements are planned from the outset by participants or emerge through enquiry and are then monitored and evaluated by them, as opposed to being imposed from outside (or ‘above’) and evaluated summatively (Durrant, 2007). This discourse of impact is facilitated and scaffolded using a range of frameworks and materials for planning and review (Frost and Durrant, 2002; Durrant and Holden, 2006; Jackson and Precey, 2009).

7. Participation, agency and voice as part of the learning

The importance of dialogue and participation in the personalisation of education is well rehearsed and linked with improved performance in learning and decision making (Warmington et al, 2004). However, we need to pay explicit attention to the supporting processes and structures by which participation and involvement is encouraged, to ensure that they are genuinely inclusive of the most vulnerable, including children and young people (Leadbeater, 2004). Arguably this has moral purpose far beyond processes of school improvement focussed on student performance, arising from shared values founded on principles of social justice and working towards a more democratic and inclusive society and building human and social capital
amongst communities (Ranson, 2000). An inclusive society supports the development of human agency which involves people having control over their own lives and the ability to help to shape their contexts for learning and living. This requires reflexive questioning and transformational leadership within existing communities of practice.

Voice exists in the realm of the ‘lifeworld’ - the organic learning community - within and between schools (Sergiovanni, 2000; Mitchell and Sackney, 2009; Grimes, 2009), as opposed to the ‘systems world’ of structures, roles and tasks. This realm attends to human relationships and stories which are celebrated in compelling and vibrant sharing events and activities amongst widening groups of participants in our projects. This qualitative evidencing and sharing of experience thrives on being given legitimacy in a culture where it may tend otherwise to be undervalued against quantitative measures focussing on student performance.

8. Transformational leadership

In order to create schools that are more inclusive, leaders are called upon to display high-order skills that some would call transformational (Burns, 1978; Tomlinson, 2004), involving:

- building a compelling vision of a better future and establishing shared organisational goals underpinned by high moral confidence
- displaying high levels of interpersonal engagement with deep understanding and personal resilience
- intellectual stimulation leading to personal, team and organisational learning
- individualised support, seeking and modelling best practices and demonstrating expectations of high performance
- creating a productive culture with a commitment to community
- fostering participation in decision-making, nurturing talent and distributing leadership.

Participants in all case study projects were encouraged to have the courage and build capacity to challenge conventional wisdom, think outside conventional frameworks and critique assumptions, beliefs or values systems, then to make choices and lead change based on "...a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective" (Cranton, 1997:22), on social justice and equity. This is fostered through facilitation of dialogue, reflection and enquiry (rather than training and telling’), including reflexivity in the learning process with opportunities for collaborative meaning making, to recognise new ways of thinking and ‘awakenings’. Evaluations show that leaders feel empowered in acknowledging the fallibility and uncertainty of knowledge and action. This requires highly flexible and responsive programmes with conscious and explicit development of trust (Bottery 2004; Covey 2006; Jackson and Precey, 2009).
9. ‘Knotworking’

The process with which participants in all the case study projects have engaged seems to fit the notion of ‘knotworking’ (Warmington et al., 2004), which represents a more fluid and responsive process than conventional team working or networking. Here, collaboration is organised with ‘distributed’ responsibility and control rather than directed and structured centrally or hierarchically. It is partly improvised and ever changing through ‘co-configuration’ of actors and activity systems that are normally only loosely connected, in order to orchestrate collective activity in new and creative ways. This requires considerable risk taking on the part of external partners.

One of the preconditions of this is effective dialogue and feedback, requiring new dialogical and reflective tools and “new, collaboratively constructed rules and infrastructures” (Engestrom and Ahonen, 2001, in Warmington et al. 2004) which are modelled with participants in group meetings and carried back into schools and other workplaces. These sharing processes clearly progress far beyond the mechanistic use of action research in the identification and articulation of ‘best practice’ and the solving of ‘problems’. The process in which participants engaged is founded on articulated shared values and shaped by bringing more people into the shared purpose of the project, increasingly emphasising transformation as opposed to transaction, and dialogue and participation as part of the learning, within inclusive communities.

10. Risk taking: the political challenge of change

Enquiry that gives true voice to learners challenges practice and places demands on individuals and organisations to meet these challenges. Participants were given space and ‘permission’ to be critical in questioning and challenging practice as an integral part of their work and without judgement or censure. Emerging from the data was a sense of release amongst participants as they had the freedom to discuss matters of importance to themselves and their communities, to choose a focus for development and follow this through, and to open these opportunities up to colleagues, students and others.

In all our case studies, participants were not simply implementing policy, but neither was policy being subverted. The projects supported leaders, including teachers and their students, in an enquiry and evaluation process gradually embracing the wider community supporting children’s learning, wellbeing and participation, moving towards more inclusive cultures in schools and communities (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Participants directly involved in the case study projects were moving ‘beyond compliance’ to develop new ways of working and to reach new understandings about learning, leadership, participation and voice.

References


