

Suggestions for further reading

On research processes

Middlewood, Coleman and Lumby (1998) *Practitioner Research in Education*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Kellett, M (2005) *How to develop children as researchers*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
NFER Topic (published twice a year by NFER).

On pupil motivation

McLean, A. (2003) *The Motivated School*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Dweck, C. (2000) 'Self-theories: their role in motivation', *Psychology Press*.

Riches, C. (1994) in *Principles of Educational Management* (ed. Bush and West-Burnham), London: Pitmans

Author and contact details

Further information can be obtained from the co-leaders of the Rushden and Higham Ferrers NLC.

Teresa Storr (01933 314611)


head@southend-jun.northants-ecl.gov.uk

or

Angela Griffiths (01933 355961)

head@denfieldpark.northants-ecl.gov.uk

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National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise

Building a community of enquiry


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This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2006, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

Aim of the project

The aim of this project was to create a community of enquiry across a network of schools, which would engage with research to inform school improvement. The project also set out to establish ways of working with an external specialist to maximise the research capacity of the network.

Dimensions of the study

Ten teachers from six primary schools (a mix of infant and junior) were directly involved in this study. The age of pupils involved in the project ranged from six to ten.

Summary of main findings

- Pupil involvement was key to pupil motivation.
- The workload of enquiry-based research was not manageable for all staff who initially set out to conduct action research.
- The first year of establishing a community of enquiry was an important period of learning. Changes may need to be made the following year.

Background and context

A Networked Learning Community (NLC) of 7 schools (six primary and one secondary) was established in September 2002 in Rusden and Higham Ferrers. The aim of the group was to raise standards of achievement by linking together in order to learn about learning. The original steering group established an Action for Learning Group (ALG) in Summer 2003 to undertake class-based research. The ALG was composed of 10 classroom practitioners (all volunteers), of whom three were on the steering group, and a Higher Education specialist. Their brief was to research the motivation of pupils.

Processes and strategies

First Year

Six research projects, one from each primary school, were started and four completed. Although the individual projects were all linked under the theme of motivation, they were all chosen by the researchers and were quite varied in scope; for example, one project asked the question, "Would giving pupils ownership of their own learning increase motivation?", whilst another investigated whether male role models for boys would increase motivation within writing.

The first year of research projects started in September 2003 and findings were fed back in September 2004.

ALG met every half-term in school time (one half day, funded by NLC) and each researcher was also given 2 days non-contact time to establish baseline data, record findings and write up final reports.

A part time project manager (a former primary teacher of one of the schools in the network) was appointed to support the group with administrative tasks such as writing minutes and chasing up people.

A Higher Education specialist, an ex-secondary headteacher, acted as critical friend, guiding and supporting the research. He provided training in research methods and stipulated that:

- the intervention should be changing elements of existing practice rather than a complete departure;
- the research design should provide before and after data;
- baselines should be established using, for example, observation and questionnaires; and
- clarity on the exact nature of intervention should be established so that teacher performance could be tested for fidelity.

He met with the group at the half-termly meetings, seeing teams on an individual basis to support with the analysis of data and draft reports. The researchers led this process.

Second Year

There were five projects started and five completed. The theme developed from motivation into pupil involvement. ALG only met once a term, again with the support of the Higher Education specialist and project manager.

The HE support took on a greater role, encouraging researchers to think more widely and analytically about other research, both within the group and beyond.

The project manager created better lines of communication such as e-mail groups, sending out agendas before meetings and generally keeping everyone in touch with each other more closely.

ALG members had a clearer idea of what they wanted to research and the focus was much more on implications for teacher practice. The work was designed so that teachers and teaching assistants could integrate the research into their normal work. The whole analysis and writing up process was less pressured and simpler.

Framework for developing research within NLC

The steering group of the NLC met termly when the progress of the researchers was reported by their three representatives. This monitoring was supportive, with funding and workload issues discussed and resolved as necessary.

At the end of the second year of research a co-ordinated staff meeting of all schools took place at which researchers disseminated their findings to interested staff. Evaluation forms indicated a positive learning experience for those attending.

The annual NLC conferences provided an opportunity for wider dissemination of findings and for teachers to exchange their experiences as researchers with other networks. The mutual support from this was invaluable to the sustainability of the project initially.

Conclusions

We found that:

- a community of enquiry does not depend on extensive analysis / report writing to be successful. Each researcher reported on their findings by writing a summary which was generally no longer than one side of A4. This followed an agreed format: title, author, school, aim of research, dimensions of study, summary of main findings, methods and implications. All the summaries were collated into a booklet with an introduction written by the HE specialist;
- when action research takes place within a school, processes can be communicated to other teachers via pupils; for example, one set of Year 3 children were so excited about the impact their voice was having on the content of their Science lessons that another Year 3 set (the control group) persuaded their teacher to become involved;
- it is important to have a first run-in year - a year of discovery:
 - one of the foci of the first year's research on motivation, pupil voice, led to the research theme for the second year;
 - workload for teacher researchers in the first year was very heavy. In part, this was because the HE specialist focussed on the possibility of researchers gaining accreditation for their work which meant the research and report had to be undertaken in a formal way. Teachers found this off-putting and the process was simplified for the second year; and
- the annual Networked Learning Community conferences were a successful vehicle for celebration and dissemination to a wider audience and therefore motivated teachers to continue with the project.

Outcomes

One of the main outcomes of this project was the establishment of an ethos of enquiry within four of the schools and in all schools, a change in culture from being fairly inward looking to developing classroom practice that was more innovative.

The teachers and teaching assistants directly involved with the research developed in many ways by:

- gaining an understanding of research methodology;
- having the opportunity to engage with other educational research papers;
- building the confidence to lead staff discussion; and
- in the case of some, successfully applying for promotion to leadership roles.

There were many outcomes from the research on pupil voice including:

- the organisation by pupils of a conference on learning;
- the establishment of school councils in all schools; and
- training for teachers across the cluster on what pupil voice means.

The research outcomes were disseminated to all teachers in the seven schools and there was impact on classroom practice beyond the ALG, which was observed but not methodically measured.

Implications for future practice

Although this project was not originally set up to look at the leadership of enquiry, the leaders have learnt some important implications:

- the need to establish methods for measuring the impact of enquiry on both staff and schools. Although everyone involved feels this has been an extremely worthwhile project, we do not have concrete evidence of this; and
- the project was dependent on funding which is now drawing to an end. Sustainability of the project will now be a challenge, but a measure of its success is that all involved want to maintain this work.