The Leadership of Enquiry: Learning Internationally

National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise

Aims of the study

Research undertaken by the Excellence through Collaboration and Enabling Leadership (EXCEL) networked learning community has focused on the extent to which learning can be enriched and extended by working in a cross-phase, cross-local authority and cross-national context.

The key strands running through the research activities generated by EXCEL are pupil voice, internationalism and the creation of a culture of school-based research in which teachers and pupils have been empowered to lead their own learning. Engagement in innovation through school-based enquiry has transformed the perception of both teachers and pupils of themselves as learners, leaders and ultimately knowledge creators.

Dimensions of the study

The EXCEL networked learning community is a partnership between four primary and two secondary schools across two local education authorities and the International Learning and Research Centre, a self-funded innovation and development centre promoting school-based research and enquiry. This network serves approximately 3,500 pupils.

Key findings and outcomes

Findings

- The model of teacher-researcher was an effective strategy for continuing professional development.
- Teachers have found the use of the journal to be an effective learning tool.
- School and network leadership has been vital in stimulating interest, gaining commitment to the project and motivating staff.

Outcomes

- Headteachers have begun to place a greater emphasis on teacher-enquiry as a mechanism for improving teaching and learning.
- Teacher-researcher partnerships have enabled teachers to be reflective, engage in professional dialogue and to challenge each other to be critically analytical.
- Story Making project classrooms have been characterised by a sense of collaborative enquiry.
- Working with an international network has broadened, deepened and enriched knowledge and understanding.

Background and context

The EXCEL networked learning community was established in 2002 as a partnership between four primary and two secondary schools across two local education authorities (South Gloucestershire and Wiltshire) and the International Learning and Research Centre. This network serves approximately 3,500 pupils. EXCEL has had an international strand woven into its work from the outset and early on in its development, as a result of collaboration with the Maltese Ministry of Education, four Maltese primary and two Maltese secondary schools were invited to be associate members of the network.

The Story Making project is an example of an enquiry that contextualises the culture in which the leadership of enquiry is being learned about. Story Making is a methodology, which has been developed through school-based enquiry programmes led by the International Learning and Research Centre. The project aims to address the learning challenge inherent in better understanding the link between speaking and writing in order to raise standards and improve the quality of children's writing. Story Making has been influenced by the 'narrative format approach' for language-learning, researched and developed by Professor Taeschner at the University of Rome over a ten-year period. The internalisation of narrative structures and language patterns is at the core of Story Making. Through the oral learning of stories, children develop a repertoire of language, which they can later draw on when writing.

A central element of the project's development has been the role of teacher-researchers working in school-based peer research partnerships both within and across the UK and Maltese primary schools. This has provided an opportunity for the Story Making methodology to be tested in multiple settings. The opportunity to learn internationally has added clarity and value to teachers' own practice.

Processes and strategies

Teachers and headteachers have received induction into school-based research methods in order to develop the leadership of enquiry across the EXCEL network. Induction has been provided so that practitioners can be supported in their understanding of the enquiry processes and roles which may be undertaken in groups, peer partnerships or individually. In addition, peer-research partnerships were set up within schools initially to provide supportive and constructive partnerships enabling teachers to be reflective and critically analytical together.

Teacher-researchers met regularly to share their findings and were supported by an ongoing programme of mentoring and coaching support.

In order to develop and sustain the impact of the Story Making project, teacher-researchers have taken on mentoring roles, team-teaching alongside colleagues and leading staff meetings and INSET training sessions. In this way, enquiry work is building capacity within and across schools and developing a critical mass of leaders who advocate school-based enquiry as an effective strategy for continuing professional development. As expressed by a project headteacher, 'it's so important to keep the flame and purpose going in order that practice becomes embedded across the year groups.'

ICT has also been exploited to develop international partnerships between teachers and students in the EXCEL network. This has worked most effectively where there has been an agreed schedule of communication between partners. The use of an extranet facility for the exchange of ideas and resources has contributed to the enquiry focus. Digital technology has been used effectively to disseminate project findings within and beyond the network. The Maltese Story Making project DVD (2005) highlights successful learning strategies and celebrates the achievements of both adult and pupil learners during the course of the project.

Findings and outcomes

- EXCEL headteachers, having seen improved standards as a consequence of enquiry activity, now place a greater emphasis on teacher-enquiry as a mechanism for improving teaching and learning. Through practitioner-led enquiry, schools are building capacity for improvement.

- The model of teacher-researcher proved to be a very effective strategy for continuing professional development.

- Teacher-researcher peer partnerships have been an essential factor in the success of the network's research projects. These have provided constructive and supportive partnerships within and across schools both locally and internationally, enabling teachers to be reflective, engage in professional dialogue and to challenge each other to be critically analytical.

- Teachers have found the use of the journal to be an effective learning tool in the leadership of classroom-based enquiry.

- Teachers have recognised the significance of pupil voice in the leadership of enquiry and triangulated their research to ensure that this voice is recognised.

- Story Making project classrooms have been characterised by a sense of collaborative enquiry and ownership, enabling pupils to see themselves as co-learners and researchers alongside their teachers.

- The development of Story Making as an innovative approach to language learning provides an illustration of how school and network-based enquiry leads to knowledge creation.

- Working with an international network broadened, deepened and enriched knowledge and understanding in a distinctive way. International peer partnerships have further enriched and extended learning for teachers and pupils.

- School and network leadership has been vital in stimulating interest, gaining commitment to the project and motivating staff. Project leadership by the International Learning and Research Centre is cited as a key factor in the success of EXCEL's work.

Research undertaken by EXCEL has provided opportunities for teachers to develop their knowledge, understanding and experience of school-based enquiry. This has led to rich professional learning.

Pupil focus group interviews indicated the extent to which the EXCEL teacher-researchers have engaged pupils in a dialogue to gain valuable insights into the most effective Story Making strategies. Expressing a preference for kinaesthetic learning during the imitation stage of learning a story, one Year 5 pupil described the use of actions as 'crucial' in helping him to internalise the story. Re-enactment of the stories through role-play was very popular with the pupils and referred to as the most successful strategy at the innovation and invention stages of Story Making. Collaborative learning through the use of 'talk partners' was also recognised by the pupils as a successful learning strategy as conveyed by the following

comment from a Year 4 pupil: *'It felt comfortable trying out our stories with a talk partner. It was okay to make mistakes.'*

In this way, pupils have been able to experience how their views can shape learning methodology and the nature of their learning environment. This has promoted a culture in which pupils are empowered to exercise high levels of learner control and thereby develop a sense of leading their own learning.

When interviewed about the implementation of Story Making in their schools, UK headteachers offered the following insights into the implementation of Story Making:

> *'School-based enquiry provides a strong sense of ownership and has been a powerful strategy for improving areas of weakness in our school'*

> *'The Story Making initiative is being driven by teacher-researchers. They have been inspired by the project and are using their enthusiasm to motivate the team.'*

Through the Storymaking project, UK and Maltese partner schools have shared research questions for school-based enquiry. This included an investigation of the key strategies that were used by children to internalise the stories during imitation, the first stage of the Story making methodology. An exchange of learning strategies arising from this enquiry focus has enabled the teacher-researchers to appreciate similarities and differences between educational systems and understand the potential of transferring learning across different contexts.

The exchange of traditional stories between UK and Maltese partner schools has also added a rich dimension to the Story Making project. This has provided interest for teachers and pupils in each country and developed intercultural knowledge and understanding.

Research methods used by teacher-researchers Teacher-researchers have developed and piloted teaching and learning strategies at each of the three stages of the Story Making methodology to measure the impact of these strategies on learning. Throughout the project the teachers have been encouraged to keep learning journals to record and reflect on their findings. When asked how these supported enquiry work, teachers fed back on the ways in which they had used their journals. These included:

- recording analysis, reflections, questions from collaborative peer teacher-researcher work;

- recording their thoughts after several weeks' work;

- capturing significant moments, often recording a child's own words and ideas;

- making a note of things to do differently next time; and

- gathering project evidence in the form of photographs, transcripts of children's talk and annotated writing samples.

In addition, teacher-researchers used interviews with pupil focus groups to evaluate the effectiveness of Story Making strategies.

Conclusions

The network has been the driver for numerous staff exchanges between the UK and Malta over the past three years. These visits have always had a clear learning focus, whether in terms of planning future projects, exchanging practice, or by learning through professional debate and observation. The power of face-to-face contact in international work cannot be underestimated and has been a crucial element in the success of EXCEL's work at all levels of learning.

The setting up of international peer partnerships have further enriched and extended learning for teachers and their pupils. The learning evident from this development is shown in the network Link Teachers' accounts and reflections, which they presented in their learning conversations at the Networked Learning Communities Annual Conference in 2004 following their visit to Malta:

'We have begun a research journey together – in partnership with our colleagues in Malta'

'This is an excellent opportunity for colleagues to work collaboratively on common projects'

'Through helping our colleagues to feel empowered through school-based enquiry, we have learned more about ourselves as practitioners and how we would now like to work as a team'

Working with an international network partnership has broadened, deepened and enriched knowledge and understanding in a distinctive way. The teacher-researchers' observations, reflections and analyses of successful teaching and learning strategies in another country has served to deepen their insights into their own pedagogy and led to marked shifts in practice.

Suggestions for further reading

Further details of the research are available at:
http://www.ellnet.org/

The Story making Framework 2005
A DfES Innovation Unit funded project coordinated by the International Learning and Research Centre

Implementing Story making: Insights from School Leaders. 2005
International Learning and Research Centre publication

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