Aims of the project

- To explore the potential of using common enquiry strategies across a network of schools

- To involve pupils in the enquiry process

Dimensions of the study

Seaham School of Technology is an 11-16 school with a comprehensive intake. It has 1100 pupils and 63 teaching staff and is the only secondary school in the town of Seaham. A former mining town on the east coast of Durham, Seaham and its neighbouring towns and villages suffer considerable social deprivation and unemployment. Many of the pupils at schools in the area have low aspirations.

The summary is based on the work of the School Improvement Group (SIG) of Seaham School of Technology. The SIG currently comprises 11 teachers (NQT, classroom teachers, heads of department and a senior manager), a member of the support staff and two pupils (a 15-year old boy and a 16-year old girl).

Summary of main findings

This is an on-going project but has to date:

- involved a cross-section of pupils in the enquiry process;

- given teachers an opportunity to engage in meaningful professional dialogue; and

- used a network of schools as a resource for enquiry and support.

Background and context

Following an Ofsted inspection in 2006 the school was placed under 'notice to improve' within 12 months. In particular Ofsted had highlighted poor attendance, poor behaviour and too much variation in the quality of teaching. One of the positive comments by Ofsted focused on the work of the School Improvement Group (SIG).

"Systems to support teaching have already led to some better teaching, but these reforms are at an early stage".

"The work of Advanced Skills Teachers …together with opportunities for collaborative planning and peer lesson observation are bringing improvement…"

The aim of the SIG was to improve students' self-esteem and attitudes as a first step to improving learning. The SIG operates within a network of SIGs from 17 schools in the geographical area. The network (SEAMS) has an overall aim of supporting member schools in providing excellent opportunities for all pupils. The network has worked closely with IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All) who have helped with problems of creating an effective and sustainable network.

What did our pupils think about their lessons?

Our enquiry began with a survey of students' views about their lessons. The responses in both Key Stages were similar. Poor pupil behaviour and lack of challenge in lessons were identified as features of bad lessons. This matched the findings of Ofsted.

Processes and strategies

Cycle of lessons studies

To begin to address the problems highlighted in the students' survey responses and staff perceptions the SIG wanted a strategy which they hoped would enhance the quality of teaching and learning in all classrooms in as short a time as possible. They decided to use a strategy introduced to us by IQEA called a 'cycle of lesson study' in which the whole staff were put into groups of three (a 'triad'). Each triad jointly planned the first of three lessons with a focus on engaging difficult and challenging classes or groups of pupils within classes. The lesson was then delivered by one of the teachers while the other two were present (we didn't like to use the word '"observed' because of the baggage it brings with it). The triad discussed the outcomes of the lesson and re-

From theory to practice: using an enquiry approach in a network of schools to improve students' self-esteem

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formed the planning. The next teacher in the triad then delivered the same lesson to a similar class. This took place until all three teachers had delivered the same lesson and all three lessons had been discussed.

Each triad was given three weeks to complete their cycle and

the whole strategy took a year to work its way through the whole school. Each department was given a time slot in the academic year for carrying out their cycle of lesson study. Discussion and planning took place outside normal school hours but the time was 'traded off' for one of the compulsory INSET days. At the end of the cycle each triad had developed and tried out a set of techniques to use in their teaching, and each teacher had also had the opportunity to observe other teachers teaching and had engaged in professional dialogue about teaching and learning strategies.

KS4 What happens in a Bad Lesson
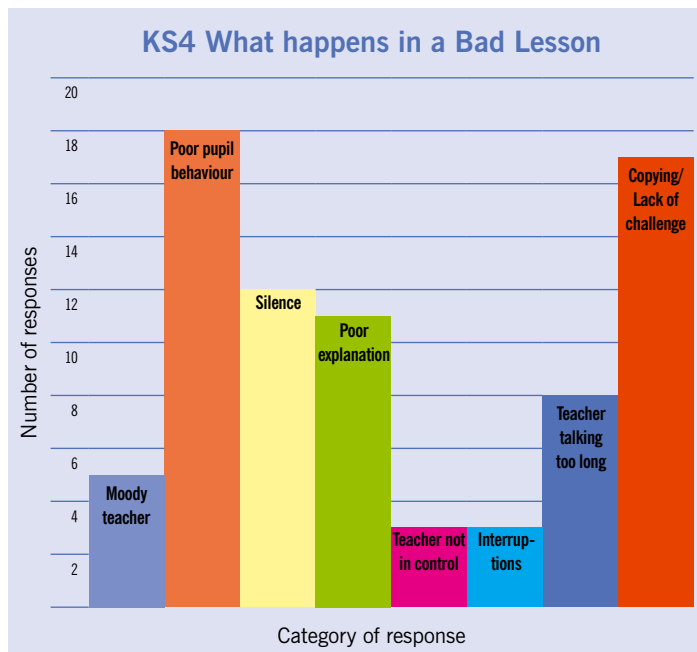
Working with colleagues in other departments

In the following year (2006/2007) the same strategy was used but this time the triads were made up of teachers from different departments. This channelled discussions away from lesson content and towards pedagogy. The focus was also changed to challenging the gifted and talented pupils.

Pupil voice

In 2007/2008 the theme for whole school policy and practice was Assessment for Learning (AfL). The increased dialogue with pupils including AfL strategies led to a reshaping of the SIG. Two pupils (a 16-year old girl and a 15-year old boy) were brought into the group as full members. They not only attended ordinary meetings of the school group but also attended 'twilight sessions' and residential meetings of all the network SIGs. Observing the growing confidence of our two pupil SIG members raised the issue of self-esteem in general and of low ability boys in particular.

Our experiences with the pupil members of the SIG encouraged us to join with other schools in the network who were interested in developing the theme of 'voices' (some were interested in parent voice, others in pupil voice).

The 'Enquiry Day'

We planned an 'Enquiry Day' to explore pupil voice further. To do this we chose two strategies introduced by IQEA which were already being used within the network. The advantage of using common strategies was that staff working in each school could use staff from other schools who were familiar with the strategies as an external resource. It developed deeper working relationships and a greater knowledge of contextual needs. All the pupils involved in the activities were briefed thoroughly beforehand. The two activities we chose were:

An 'Account of Practice'

In this strategy the host school frames enquiry questions for a team of visiting teachers or managers. The visitors interview members of the host school (pupils or teachers for example) and feed back their findings to the host school managers. This had been done previously at senior management level in the school, but we decided to use a cross section of pupils as the interviewees. We picked 15 pupils from across the age range (three pupils from each of Y10, Y9, Y8 and Y7) to be questioned by the six visiting teachers from our three network schools. They were guided and supported by Kieran and Rebecca (our two SIG pupil members), who gave the visitors a 'How it works' sheet and asked them to decide who would like to ask each question. The questions were about students' feelings of self-esteem.

'Through their eyes'

Pupils from Y8 who found it less easy to communicate their feelings verbally were given a digital camera with a time limit and a maximum number of photographs they can take. The pupils took photographs of each other and objects in the surroundings that reflected their different moods and feelings. The camera group were given 30 minutes to take ten pictures; five showed when they felt happy, five showed when they felt unhappy. A teacher accompanied the group. The pictures were printed immediately and formed the basis of the ensuing discussion.

Outcomes

How did the cycles of lesson study benefit teachers' professional learning?

Within departments

The results of the exercise were successful beyond our expectations. As each triad completed their cycle they were encouraged to post their 'story' on a 'storyboard' on the home page of the school intranet so colleagues could share their professional learning experiences.

Typical comments included:

> "The planning meetings were excellent. It is good quality time. You are working with colleagues that have the same problems as you and have some of the answers".

> "The triad process seems to demand a lot of organisation at first but once you start teaching and debriefing it's great to share concerns and solutions; three heads are better than one!"

An interim evaluation exercise took place after one term when completed triads told their stories to the rest of the staff in an informal gathering with refreshments. At the end of the year 20 staff were interviewed about the experience. 19 results were positive, 1 was indifferent.

> "If used correctly it is invaluable. If a clear objective can be set out and thus studied, then a lot can be taken away. It works only if you stay focused on this objective though".

> "It has made me more open-minded to free up my teaching method".

> "The triad process helps get the imagination going again".

Across departments

This produced a mixed response from the staff. Only a few staff explored new pedagogy; most staff felt more comfortable working in their own subject area. Those that did grasp the opportunities to investigate pedagogy found it most stimulating.

> "I never realised such different demands were placed on our pupils as they moved from lesson to lesson but I saw that successful teaching techniques were successful in different subject areas, and poor ones failed everywhere".

What were pupils' views following the enquiry day?

During the feedback session with staff both Kieran and Rebecca were very confident and commanded the meeting (which included the Deputy Head, three Heads of department and seven other teachers). Responses during the feedback included:

> "CCTV and new fencing make us feel safe".

> "We don't like some corridors at lesson changes; there should be a one way system enforced".

> "We like the new family tutor system; you can talk to other pupils who are different ages".

> "We don't like being judged against brothers and sisters".

> "We don't like being in mixed ability groups because only the good ones get the help".

> "We like places which are quiet, but not silent". "Calm". "Light and airy".

The pupils were happy in any area of the school which was new, contained new equipment or was well-decorated with posters and pupils' work. They also felt happy in lessons where they got help, especially the music department. Those areas "made us feel we mattered and we were worth the effort".

Enquiry methods

The SIG researched the pupils' perceptions of teaching and learning in the school using a questionnaire given to approximately 150 pupils across Key Stages 3 and 4. We targeted one high ability class and one low ability class in lessons in Maths, English and Science for each of the two Key Stages. The questions were open-ended and simple, giving pupils an opportunity to express themselves: "What happens in a good lesson?" "What happens in a bad lesson?" The responses were put into categories by the SIG.

For the 'Account of Practice' activity we used a set of five questions:

1 How does the way teachers speak to you make you feel?

2 Do you feel safe in school?

3 How does the way other pupils treat you make you feel?

4 How do you feel when people talk about being successful in school?

5 (WORD SORT) What makes a classroom a nice place to be in?
 (Pupils used 6 of the words to build a triangle displaying the most important things, with the most important at the top).

Each of the teachers sat at a table with one question. A group of pupils joined each teacher. They were given 15 minutes to discuss each question before moving on to the next teacher. Pupils moved round the carousel of questions with Kieran and Rebecca controlling the rotation.

When all pupils had engaged with all questions the two pupil SIG members joined the interviewers to decide jointly what points had arisen from the exercise, (the other pupils enjoyed biscuits and fruit juice and a delayed return to their lessons). The pupil SIG members then compiled a report to feed back to the full SIG a few days later.

Conclusions

The interim findings from the project led me towards a number of conclusions including:

- The abilities of pupils should never be under-estimated

- The processes of enquiry are at least as important as the outcomes

- It is possible to bridge the gap between theory and reality and develop workable structures which facilitate inter-school enquiry

From here we will concentrate on developing our pupils themselves as effective enquirers across the network.

Suggestions for further reading

Jackson, D. and Tasker, R. (2003) *Professional Learning Communities*. Bedfordshire: NCSL

National College for School Leadership (NCSL). (2005) *Establishing a network of schools*. Bedfordshire: NCSL

Clarke, P. (2000) *Learning Schools, Learning Systems*.London: Continuum.

Fielding, M. (2007) Beyond "Voice": New roles, relationships and contexts in researching with young people *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education,* 28 (3) pp. 301-310.

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). (2007) *Working together – listening to the voices of children and young people*. London: DCSF.

Paul Clarke has recently set up a 'blog' about networks entitled "Creating Sustainable communities":
http://sustainableretreat.blogspot.com/

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