



Investigating the research-engaged school

Dawn Sanders and Kathryn Tomlinson

Current debates in education have highlighted the role of research in relation to school improvement. It is widely argued that educational practice should be more evidence based, but how classroom practice relates to research is open to question. This is a dialogue in which it is crucial that both teachers and researchers are involved. In this context, Handscomb and MacBeath propose a model of a 'research-engaged school', which has research and enquiry 'at the heart of the school, its outlook, systems and activity' (2003). And in order to provide the space for a community of enquiry to be built between research, practice and policy, Saunders (2004) argues that 'translators, envoys and mediators' are needed, who can 'speak to both cultures in their own language'.

In September 2003 the NFER began a project that aimed to investigate the development of research-engaged schools, and to examine the role of professional researchers in supporting school engagement in and with research. The project builds on previous NFER work that investigated the role of the LEA in supporting school engagement with research (Wilson *et al.*, 2003). This endeavour takes school research engagement a step further, in that teachers are undertaking their own investigative projects, as well as engaging with the research of others.

In this project, the NFER researchers have a dual role. On the one hand, the research team seeks to support teachers to explore a range of research–practice relationships in their own learning communities, as teachers collaboratively undertake their own research projects in schools. Alongside this supporting role, the NFER researchers are mapping both the teachers' journeys towards research engagement and their own place in these innovative partnerships. The project is investigating how teachers perceive research and its role in a school, as well as the relationship of research engagement to teaching and learning, school improvement and continuing professional development. We aim to identify models of school research engagement, with a view to encouraging other schools to use the learning from this project to become research-engaged schools themselves.

Research partnerships

Also novel, for us, in this work is the broad partnership of diverse participants. Not only are the schools working with the NFER, but also with one another. Additionally, the five local education authorities (LEAs) in which the research schools are located are key partners in this process. They are sponsors of the project and assisted



with the initial selection of participating schools (seeking a range of prior research experience and type of school). They are also active partners in the research support network and, as such, initiate activities for local networks of participating schools. It is envisioned that these local networks will sustain the work once the national project has been completed. The other sponsors of the project – the Local Government Association, the General Teaching Council for England and the National College for School Leadership – are also actively engaged with the development of the project.

School research

All schools were invited to apply to participate in the project, and to nominate two members of staff to lead the work in their schools. In recognition of the importance of leadership and internal support to enable schools to realise the potential of research to contribute to school improvement, all were also asked to identify a member of their senior management team who would provide management support to the project. Research in the schools commenced, in most cases, in January 2004, and data collection came to an end in the summer term. In the autumn, teachers began to write up their findings as case studies with support from the NFER. These will contribute to the final report, which is to be launched at a public conference in autumn 2005.

'Lighthouse researchers'

By initiating and participating in this project, NFER staff are embarking on a relationship with teachers, in which they act as 'lighthouse researchers' to assist teachers in creating and forming research-engaged schools (McMeniman *et al.*, 2000). This role has been developed through visits to individual schools, during which the researchers both investigate teachers' approaches to research and support them on their developmental journey. Additionally, the NFER arranged and facilitated two seminars for all project participants in December 2003 and June 2004. At these, school research teams shared their progress with their peers, while the NFER team provided information on the

progress of the national project and individualised advice to each school partnership. In addition to the involvement of visiting researchers as critical friends and facilitating – along with the LEAs – the sharing of experience with one another, the NFER has established a project website. This has been used to host an online diagnostic questionnaire and a forum for research/practice dialogue; both are new approaches for the NFER and may be developed further in the future.

The future of teacher–researcher engagement

It is hoped that a major outcome of this project will be teachers and researchers that can fulfil these roles by participating in learning communities where there is a common currency of ideas and practice about research and what it means to be a research-engaged school. A challenge for NFER researchers in the future will be to learn from these partnerships and reflect on our role in the research/practice debate.

References

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