



ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCHOOL AND LEA SELF-EVALUATION

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How can research engagement contribute?

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Introduction

Current debates in education have highlighted the potential of research to contribute to school improvement. It has been argued that educational practice should be more evidence based, but the ways in which schools can use research and its potential to impact on practice are not yet fully understood. In 2003, Graham Handscomb and John MacBeath outlined a vision of a 'research engaged school' where research and enquiry would be 'at the heart of the school, its outlook, systems and activity' (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003)

In September 2003, the NFER began a two-year project that aimed to investigate the development of research engaged schools. The NFER team is working in partnership with 15 schools (both primary and secondary) and LEA advisers in five English authorities. The project is sponsored by the NFER, the Local Government Association, the National College for School Leadership and the General Teaching Council of England. In addition, the LEAs are all making a financial contribution and the schools have agreed to invest staff time in this work

Schools applied to participate in the project and then selected a research question that they wanted to investigate. The participating schools include both those with some experience of research involvement and those for which this is an entirely new development. The project began with a seminar to explain the aims, structure and timetable and to help school research teams to develop their ideas for a research activity. Each school received a visit from a member of the research team in the spring term of 2004, followed by a second seminar in June. The research team is currently conducting their second and final round of visits to schools, helping staff to analyse the results of their activities and to write a case study account of their work.

Throughout the project, the researchers have taken a dual role: acting as both advisers to the schools and researchers of the process of research engagement, including identifying the difficulties encountered as well as attempting to identify the ideal conditions needed for this ‘exotic plant’ to take root and grow.

The policy context

This is an interesting time to be working on such a project, not least because the policy context is changing rapidly and radically. The introduction of workforce remodelling will have far-reaching implications for roles and responsibilities of staff and should provide more time for reflection and research. The new relationship envisaged between government and schools will put a greater focus on school self evaluation, including the production by schools of telling evidence of school effectiveness. In addition, the recent emphasis on ‘personalised learning’ includes an acknowledgement of the school as a learning organisation.

At the same time, schools will have greater responsibility for determining and managing teachers’ professional learning and development needs, and for linking these to performance management on the one hand and school improvement on the other. Such a notion of an entitlement to professional learning – as encapsulated in the GTC’s Teachers’ Professional Learning Framework – starts with initial teacher training and continues throughout the whole of a teacher’s career. The possibility that schools can become ‘learning communities’ opens up the prospect of embedding lateral networks (communication from school to school) in addition to vertical approaches (central government to LEA and school) to spreading good practice and innovation.

What is the LEA’s role?

The LEA contribution to school improvement has seen a considerable shift in emphasis during recent years. The Code of Practice on LEA-School Relations (DfEE, 2001) emphasised that LEAs should work differentially with schools, and intervene in inverse proportion to success. This may have resulted in a tendency for LEAs to minimise their role in supporting schools and working creatively with them. However, even at the time, the Code of Practice did recognise that LEAs have a role in

promoting the sharing of good practice between schools. In recent times there has been a readjustment in the role of the LEA to work developmentally with schools. So, the relationship between LEA advisers and schools has moved from one of support to challenge to support once again.

If we take seriously the growing body of evidence that there is a link between the enquiring, reflective practitioner and improvements in learning and teaching (see for example, Pollard and Tann, 1987), then the role of the LEA must, to some extent, include encouraging the environment in which this can take place. In this context, the LEA can:

- Make strategic connections
- Facilitate research partnerships and networks
- Make links with other agencies
- Provide challenge and critique.

How might this look in practice? Perhaps it would help to give an example of developments in Essex LEA. Essex has made a commitment to research engagement through establishing the Forum for Learning and Research Enquiry (FLARE) which consists of a group of schools working in partnership with the University of Cambridge School of Education. Essex has made a commitment to become a researching local authority, including making it a priority in its Education Development Plan and including research in the remit of its senior LEA staff.

In relation to the current NFER project, the LEA is providing leadership and encouragement to the schools, including practical help, an additional perspective and a connection with LEA priorities and strategies. It is also the role of the LEA to provide critique. Some pertinent questions include:

- What difference is teacher engagement in research making to the school?
- Is it involving a coterie of enthusiasts or is the initiative universal and widely shared?
- What is the “stickability” of the research activity? Is it entirely dependent on the ‘hero-researcher’?
- Is research engagement truly making a contribution at the core of school improvement or is it a luxury – and how would you know?

Concluding thought

This project is focusing on research engagement as a vehicle for encouraging evidence-informed practice, linked to individual and whole-school development. At the half-way stage, we do not yet know where this journey will take us, but we are certainly finding a great deal of interest, challenge and enjoyment in the voyage so far.

References

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