University of Glasgow | Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

Collaborative Action Research: Building teacher leadership to tackle educational inequity

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Professor Christopher Chapman and Kevin Lowden

Reflect on findings from research and development activity conducted by the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change (ROC), to explore:

- How Collaborative Action Research (CAR), as part of evidence-based collaborative networks, can foster teacher leadership and empower them to tackle educational inequality.

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International educational research and practice demonstrates that the most effective collaborative school/ system improvement efforts:

- Are locally owned and led by practitioners and leaders working in partnership and collaboration with like-minded professionals and other stakeholders

    (e.g. Fullan 2013, Chapman et al. 2012, Chapman, C and Hadfield, M 2010, Donaldson 2012, Ainscow et al., 2012, OFSTED, 2000; Harris et al, 2005, Hadfield and Chapman 2009; Kerr et al. 2003),

- Have an alignment of change processes in curriculum development, teacher development and school self-evaluation (Menter et al., 2010: 26).

- The School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP) was a three year solution-focused approach to Scotland's attainment issues with a focus on innovating to tackle educational inequality.

- The programme aimed to encourage staff to learn from each other, experiment with their practice and monitor and evaluate change.

- School Improvement Partnerships were action research programmes involving a process of *collaborative inquiry* which created leadership opportunities and professional learning

- A key feature of the SIPP was the support provided by the Robert Owen Centre at Glasgow University to evaluate and build practitioners' capacity to conduct collaborative enquiry.

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- Education Scotland worked with local authorities and ROC researchers to broker and facilitate partnerships within and across schools and local authorities.

- The approach was underpinned by systematic enquiry and the use of evidence to address Scotland's attainment issues with a focus on tackling educational inequality.

- The SIPP projects encouraged staff to learn from each other, experiment with their practice and monitor and evaluate change.

- Projects were locally owned and led by teachers and school leaders working with like-minded professionals

- Partnership working with a focus on exploring specific issues relating to educational inequity.

- The use of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) and evidence to identify key challenges, experiment with innovative practices and monitor developments.

- The creation of leadership opportunities and professional learning of staff at all levels.

- A commitment to reciprocity and mutual benefit for all involved.

- The development of arrangements to support long-term collaboration and new approaches to capacity building.

- Explicit links to strategic improvement planning in schools and local authorities.

- The involvement of a diverse range of relevant partners.

The collaborative enquiry approach is guided by an overarching framework comprised of eight broad overlapping phases:

- analysis of context;

- agreeing enquiry questions;

- agreeing purposes;

- making use of the available expertise;

- collecting data (using a wider range of appropriate methods);

- making sense of the evidence;

- deciding on actions to be taken;

- monitoring outcomes.

	A/SA/E	ER	G & F	I&AB	M&EL	SL	WD&R	F
Aim	To tackle educational inequity							
Approach	Focused projects & collaborative action research							
Councils	3	1	2	2	2	1	2	1
Schools	3	2	>30	2	12	1	13	9
School Phase	S	P	P&S	S	S	S	P	P&S
Main partners	Teachers and Head teachers							CLDW, SfLA, teachers
Positive Impact	Parent. Engag., pupil attend-ance	Maths	New system of collabo ration	Parent. Engag.	Use of data motiv.	Pupil mental well-being, attend-ance, motiv.	Maths and literacy	Literacy

Impact of SIPP

- After three years of implementation the evidence demonstrated that that the SIPP had a positive impact on teachers and students in participating schools and in some cases beyond.

- There was evidence to support claims that the work within partnerships had closed the attainment gap for the target projects (Chapman et al 2016a, Chapman et al 2016b).

- Progress and impact was most evident in those partnerships that were able to adapt and apply the principles and core concepts underpinning the programme to their own context.

- The range of positive developments and impact demonstrate that the underlying principles for collaborative enquiry to tackle educational inequity provides a positive way forward.

- The majority of the partnerships went on to reflect lessons learned in school and local authority planning to sustain approaches that have been identified as making a difference, particularly through the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

- The design of the programme deliberately took a phased approach to implementation. This has enabled it to evolve from a set of discrete partnerships to a programme of inter-connected partnerships working as a 'networked improvement community' similar to how Bryk and colleagues (2015) describe their work in the United States.

Successful partnerships:

- Maintain a clear focus on tackling the attainment gap

- Invest time and space to build positive relationships

- Promote a risk-taking culture

- Draw on external expertise where necessary

- Are locally owned and led – empowered leadership at all levels

- Generate and share new ways of working

- Are tailored and context specific

- Make a commitment to using Collaborative Action Research to inform practice and data to understand impact

- Provide structured opportunities for collaboration.

- Networked improvement communities more likely to flourish when they draw on a range of approaches including lesson study, instructional rounds, improvement science and collaborative action research.

- Feedback from the partnerships revealed that shifting local and national policy priorities and changes in resources and staffing locally can present a challenge to the pace of progress and sustainability of activity.

- However, where local authorities and school leaders are agile and build in the processes to their planning the arrangements are now influencing practice more widely across the local authorities.

- There are number of cases where SIPP activity has become integral to new attainment challenge developments.

Development of teacher leadership

- The capacity building principles and practices promoted by the programme have made a significant contribution to supporting the development of teacher leadership.

- The programme has injected new ideas and ways of working into classrooms and schools. These ideas and practices have been adopted by a cadre of teachers that have led change from their classrooms, into their schools and to other schools within their local authority and in some cases across local authorities.

- The programme has tended to have most traction where a group of committed practitioners has been keen to build new working relationships and prepared to take on leadership responsibilities for personal and professional satisfaction rather than monetary reward.

Development of teacher leadership

- Where teacher leaders have been supported by school and local authority leaders, projects have driven forward with pace and focus and have also been able to engage other staff and expand the influence of the programme.

- These teacher leaders have developed a wide repertoire of knowledge and skills, ranging from research methods, data use and understanding to project planning and management and opportunities to practice leadership and management tasks.

- Their involvement in collaborative enquiry has been an important step in building leadership capacity within the system.

- In addition to developing an expanded repertoire of knowledge and skills teacher leaders received higher levels of exposure to a diverse range of professionals.

Development of teacher leadership

- The conversations and interactions with researchers, local authority staff, senior education officers and inspectors from Education Scotland, educational psychologists, community development workers and others provided teachers with access to a range of insights on issues which enriched teachers' professional experience and their understanding of the complexity of tackling the attainment gap.

- Cuts in key LA personnel and leaders places an increased importance on 'empowered leadership' at a school level.

- Perhaps, the most significant dimension of teacher leadership development has been the opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles beyond their own classrooms and schools.

- This has involved providing opportunities for junior teachers to lead collaborative professional development within and between schools.

- The SIPP model has developed a network of early and mid-career teachers who are leading a range of initiatives at relatively early stages of their careers, in some cases across local authority boundaries.

- We would argue that the leadership experience they have gained within this programme places them in a position to develop into the next generation of system leaders.

- While collaborative enquiry driven initiatives like SIPP have an important role to play in delivering specific outcomes and acting as vehicles for meaningful professional learning, their real value may lie in their leverage for handing greater responsibility, decision-making, ownership and, perhaps most crucially, power over to teachers.

- Stenhouse reminds us that it is teachers who change classrooms not policies or protocols.

Only the pursuit of research directly applied to the curriculum and teaching puts the teacher in the power position; for he [sic] is in possession of the only valid laboratory, the classroom.

(Stenhouse, 1980, p. 44)

Schools are tasked with tackling educational inequity with teachers increasingly being placed at the centre of reforms.

1. Do these CAR-based approaches provide a positive context that places teachers at the centre of educational change and empower them to lead change?

2. Is working collaboratively with other teachers and partner services sufficient to provide the power and resources to undertake the task?

3. Looking to the challenges ahead, do we need to formally recognise and promote the role of Data/ Enquiry Lead' in schools and collaboratives?