

**Judy Durrant** sees research as being essential to school improvement. She shows how inclusive enquiry, leadership and learning can maximise engagement and build the capacity for improvement

# School Improvement is Everybody's Business

## Using research to extend professionalism, increase participation and enrich development

Central to improvement is the process of enquiry: capturing what is currently happening, monitoring and evaluating change, connecting to wider research and providing opportunities for personal and reflection and intellectual development through engagement with evidence from a specific professional context. This article examines some practical ways of approaching this to develop communities where active participation and collaboration in leadership and enquiry are fundamental to learning and improvement



## Professional learning communities: enquiry and action

Approaches based on *enquiry* – engaging in and with research – coupled with *involvement* in school improvement as participants, contributors and leaders, can offer powerful opportunities for professional development that is part of real school change. Becoming comfortable with ‘research’ is far from an optional extra for leaders of change, indeed it should be a vibrant, active, practical, relevant and supportive process. It need not involve people in becoming ‘scholars’ in the traditional sense (although it may), or taking on extra projects to add to the workload. It rightly requires and encourages people to be *learners*, to have a learning and questioning disposition, whatever their role or stage of career development, using evidence as the basis for improvements. For example, support staff who are present in lessons might be a valuable ‘field force’ for enquiry and provide additional unique insights, although this may need funding rather than relying on goodwill. ‘Research engagement’ (Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003) should be considered as integral to processes of school improvement, extending and making meaning of school self-evaluation in order to enrich curriculum and pedagogy. However we need to challenge preconceptions of research in the school setting to ensure that it is fit for purpose and supports inclusive and collaborative approaches to leadership of change.

Shared processes of reflection, enquiry and leadership can draw people within the school community together to engage in dialogue and activity to address issues of concern and priorities for organisational development within their own spheres of influence. Impact is much more marked where headteachers, senior leaders and advisers plan strategically to allow teachers and other staff space and time for professional development, support for reflection and dialogue and ‘permission’ to be critical, question and challenge practice as an integral part of their work. Improvement – making a better school – is seen as a collaborative, inclusive, evidence-based enterprise, often led by teachers but ultimately the responsibility of the whole community.

In order to meet these challenges we need to revisit and revitalise our notions of ‘professional learning communities’ (Hargreaves, 2003) as organic and evolving systems where teachers, school leaders and the wider workforce, students, parents and governors, actively participate and contribute to make their schools and communities better places to live and learn (Mitchell and Sackney, 2009). This requires a new emphasis of the relationship between research and leadership to ensure that enquiry leads to action and action prompts enquiry, developing leadership and research capacity side by side (Frost, 2007) and contributing to ‘knowledge creation’ (Hargreaves, 1999). People engage in profound and powerful professional learning *as part*

*of their work*, rather than as a prerequisite for their work. Learning that arises from research and leadership is highly personalised, fully relevant and contextualised. Participants, including school staff, students and the wider community gain confidence in and take responsibility for school improvement.

## Reducing barriers to leadership

There is a well-established discourse around shared leadership linked to school improvement, supported by professional development for teachers, headteachers and the wider workforce through nationally and locally recognised leadership programmes and pathways. Even so, school leadership is often still tagged to formal roles and responsibilities and tasks; much of it responds to external directives and accountability frameworks and might more accurately be described as management or implementation. In times of economic, social and political uncertainty, schools need to develop resilience and confidence as organisations to ride out local and national volatility. More than this, schools must articulate clear values, purposes and aims in relation to their response to global questions concerning the sustainability of human communities (Clarke, 2009). Given the uniqueness of school circumstances and cultures, it is clear that much of the responsibility and action for consistent improvement and sustainable change - genuine leadership - must come from individuals within local communities and contexts.

Interesting challenges are posed by applying inclusive principles to school improvement. Inclusive organisations are engaged in processes of change that reduce barriers to learning and participation for students (Ainscow et al., 2006). Genuinely inclusive cultures extend this beyond the classroom, playground and dinner hall, to reduce barriers to *leadership* and participation for all members of the school community.

There is much greater potential for active and creative involvement of everyone in the school community in organisational change. This may include teachers, students, support staff, a wider range of education professionals within the children’s workforce, parents, governors and others within the local community. The participation itself leads to powerful learning, builds leadership capacity and strengthens trust, communication and mutual support, all of which sustain schools in striving for improvement and keep them steady in turbulent times.

## Structuring enquiry-based leadership

While there are more opportunities than ever for extending professional qualifications, there are also plenty of ways of supporting involvement in enquiry, leadership and school development through local projects and specially designed programmes that do not require the submission of academic assignments, or where these are optional.

Funding and commissioning powers are shifting to schools and the emphasis on partnership working in the new Ofsted framework can give leverage to collaborative approaches to development and enquiry that strengthen formal links and foster mutual learning.

Teachers, with the support of their headteachers and senior leaders, are the lynch pins of inclusive, enquiry-based improvement in which colleagues from across the children’s workforce, students, parents and others are active participants and contributors. Teachers are at the centre of learning relationships with their students and support staff and they are at the business end of organisational change. They are often in the best position to understand current issues, identify practical problems and concerns and inject new ideas. In short, improvement cannot happen without them. Teacher leadership and enquiry not only transforms classroom practice, but also helps to develop a more inclusive, active, inquisitive and motivational professional culture. Below is some practical advice on how this can be achieved, from first steps to the sustenance and growth of enquiry, leadership and learning to build capacity for teacher enquiry and teacher-led development<sup>1</sup>. (See Figure 1).

The ideas in this table show how shared leadership supported by enquiry can be integral to school development. This can have significantly greater impact where planned carefully and strategically to enhance existing activity and where conceived in fresh ways that

involve more people in processes of change. Using such approaches should generate momentum and build capacity for improvement, enhancing existing activity rather than fighting it for time.

**No short cuts**

With so many demands on school budgets and people’s time, it is tempting to cut corners by organising an introductory meeting or event and then relying on teachers’ own motivation and understanding to carry them through the research process, perhaps with offers of optional or informal internal mentoring. In practice this minimalist approach may undermine the process, particularly for those not yet used to the idea of practitioner research. Voluntary mentoring and support is unlikely to be taken up and reporting may become a bureaucratic exercise. So it is helpful for senior leaders, advisers and consultants to introduce strategies to value people’s commitment, maximise sharing and collaboration to feed the development of schools and maintain momentum and enthusiasm, making these explicit from the start. The example below shows how external frameworks of support have been created in one project to scaffold teachers’ action research while the curriculum and pupil participation themes have broadened engagement so that there is impact extending to many more people than those directly involved.

**Figure 1: Developing a more inclusive, active and inquisitive school culture**

<b>1. Establishing purpose</b>	<p>Communicate a clear rationale for introducing enquiry-based learning and leadership. Avoid jargon and explain concepts. Allow plenty of time for communication and discussion with opportunities for people to ask questions and make meaning at different levels and times.</p> <p>Establish a ‘project’ to give status to the work, with an acronym and a logo. Decide on one key idea to capture imagination and commitment.</p> <p>Extend and refresh current work and make use of existing expertise, reinforcing the school’s development priorities and improvement plan.</p> <p>Build review and incentive into existing frameworks such as performance management.</p>
<b>2. Providing structure</b>	<p>Put a set of dates into the school calendar, including launch at the start and review / celebration at the end with regular meetings and reference points in between. Report at collaborative events, not to meet bureaucratic targets.</p> <p>Create a set of materials in advance to support planning, leadership, enquiry and review. Use these to support meetings and individual mentoring.</p> <p>Protect time by avoiding clashes with other meetings, but also try to make group meetings so interesting, purposeful and valuable that they are unmissable.</p> <p>Make sure that school development, CPD and any accreditation are properly aligned so that they complement each other rather than conflict.</p>

<b>3. Finding a focus</b>	<p>Provide space and structure for reflection on individual concerns, issues and priorities. Use 'SWOT' analysis, card sort exercises etc. to capture and reinforce ideas and discussions.</p> <p>Ask individuals or groups to specify a 'development priority' and linked 'research questions', i.e. 'What do you aim to change?'; 'What do you want to find out?'</p> <p>Match aims for enquiry against organisational plans and priorities and the 'project brief'. Check these periodically as individuals share progress and gain feedback.</p> <p>Redesign existing processes and documentation, e.g. department or team development planning could introduce new elements on enquiry and evidence.</p>
<b>4. Methodology matters</b>	<p>Introduce regular methodological discussions supporting systematic, rigorous, effective, ethical enquiry. Consider external input from a consultant or tutor with methodological expertise, also make use of local expertise, e.g. teachers who have completed previous action research.</p> <p>Share useful websites and publications giving suggestions and examples of practitioner research. Encourage collaborative and creative approaches to data gathering, not just questionnaires. Reinforce the value of qualitative research in providing new information and fresh perspectives.</p> <p>The link with 'action' through leadership needs constant reinforcement and strategic planning. Research and reflect on processes of managing change, sharing leadership and school improvement.</p>
<b>5. Participation and voice</b>	<p>Consider all consultation and collaborative activity as a potential data gathering opportunity. Design data gathering to involve more people and raise awareness of issues and priorities. Present evidence back to those involved to underpin proposed change.</p> <p>Involve people as researchers and respondents to develop enquiry and collaborative learning as part of the process of change.</p> <p>Use external partners and collaboration to add valuable critical input and positive challenge.</p>
<b>6. Inclusive leadership</b>	<p>Encourage everyone to think of themselves as leaders and to use enquiry to draw others in. Value and celebrate individual agency; promote an inclusive approach to school development including debate about 'how change happens in our school' and how this can be improved.</p> <p>Allow time for reflection and enquiry about professional development and leadership, including discussion of dilemmas and problems. Encourage mutual support.</p>
<b>7. Making an impact</b>	<p>Reinforce individuals' responsibilities in contributing to leadership of school development: actively encourage strategies that will make the most difference</p> <p>Plan intended outcomes from the outset, using frameworks to document and review progress. Consider different levels of learning – student learning, professional learning, organisational learning and network/system/community learning.</p> <p>Ensure that individual and collaborative work is valued, supported, shared and celebrated. This could include an in-house programme of CPD and sharing beyond the school.</p>
<b>8. Creating and sharing knowledge</b>	<p>Build in time for conferences and networking to disseminate beyond those directly involved. Look for fresh funding for well established professional communities and networks, or plan new ones.</p> <p>Beware of attempting didactic dissemination; use a case study, set of questions or research evidence to stimulate discussion and generate collaborative activity and individual action.</p> <p>Publish ideas, resources and outcomes using a format with a series of generic headings for simple copying or web dissemination. Make sure everything is properly acknowledged. This values people's work as well as sharing their ideas.</p>

## An example of work in progress: Curriculum Development And Pupil Participation In Kent<sup>2</sup>

Kent County Council and Canterbury Christ Church University have developed a partnership to support teacher-led action research focussed on curriculum development and pupil participation. Several planning meetings enabled advisers and university staff to establish clear purposes and design a structure for the project, supported by some input on action research and curriculum change. The LA invited schools to apply and teachers attended a launch event in the autumn, with speakers on curriculum, creativity and pupil voice, followed by planning based on a choice of focus within the two specified themes. This was followed by school-based support from the partnership, with a critical friend allocated to each school for face to face planning and review meetings along with email or telephone support. Headteachers supported the project by allowing teachers to attend the group meetings and supporting the school-based enquiry. Around 15 schools are taking part, with one or two teachers from each participating directly.

Teachers met in January for a planning day including inputs on action research methodology, leadership of change and planning and evaluation of impact. School-based support continued. An interim group meeting in March enabled teachers and the LA and University partners to share progress and intended outcomes. From this it was clear that the project was already having an impact on children's and young people's learning, including greater participation, motivation and interest in learning (as demonstrated by positive comments from teachers and pupils and also quantitative measures such as improved attendance). Developments included involving students in classroom observations and feedback, Year 10 students filming infants' learning and the introduction of more creative approaches to the curriculum at different scales.

The partnership team reflected that teachers and their students are discovering 'a better process' in learning, teaching and professional and school development with broad outcomes including wellbeing, enjoyment, participation and confidence as well as academic performance. There are a number of student-led and student-assisted curriculum projects in which students may be genuine leaders or may be developing some leadership such as co-construction, research and leading lessons. Children and young people in some of the schools are developing joint responsibility for the learning (including planning and research), developing into responsible citizens and becoming more a part of their community. In some cases there is more parental involvement. Teachers also felt it was significant to report the 'fun' and 'smiles' generated by their projects. The focus of conversations and discussions is not on National Curriculum levels but on children's journeys and deeper learning. Eventually, it is felt that this focus on process is likely to lead to higher performance; evidence is being gathered to evaluate final outcomes.

Teachers recognise that they are collecting valuable and meaningful data that cannot often be numerically recorded. They are debating and making judgements about what 'good' qualitative data would look like and have used a range of methodological tools and approaches such as attitudinal surveys, posters, sticky notes and films. Teachers are intellectually challenged and hugely motivated, saying they 'feel professional again' and 'can input to education again'. They have responded very positively to the curriculum focus, along with the relationships and dialogue generated through greater student involvement. It is recognised that this is not research that disseminates findings of 'what works', it is the research itself that is integral to their professional learning; the enquiry process engages and motivates teachers. This cannot be transferred to other teachers by training, it has to involve going through the process of choosing a focus and leading change themselves.

### Spreading the word and sharing the work

Where a limited number of people are directly involved, the strategies described will enable them to act as catalysts for development, using inclusive enquiry approaches to capture others' interest and imagination and involve them in change. As the activity gathers momentum and more people are gaining confidence in their involvement in school improvement, senior leaders can capitalise on this growing knowledge and expertise to strengthen collaborative

relationships and build even more capacity for enquiry and involvement, transferring to other projects until this becomes a normal way of working. New staff and students can then be inducted into these approaches to sustain the shift of culture. This can include

- workshops and presentations on school development days and within the school's annual CPD programme,
- a research and development forum for staff (not





restricted to teachers)

- individual presentation and discussion at senior leaders' meetings,
- a bulletin or updated notice board with summaries of projects,
- a staffroom 'swap shop' or use of shared drive for ideas and resources, conferences
- a joint conference with other schools for celebration, dissemination, sharing and collaborative work
- inputs to cluster, federation or Local Authority events.

Careful use of meetings, mentoring and existing links and structures by the senior leadership of the school will maximise the influence of such activity. It is important to allow plenty of time for dialogue and collaborative working (as opposed to conference-style PowerPoint inputs followed by a few questions) but this might require new structures and initiatives in order to maintain momentum in the longer term. The activity is not restricted to staff, of course; students can and do lead and contribute to INSET days, present their research at staff meetings and provide inputs and displays for conferences. Beyond sharing ideas, allowing proper time for sharing, discussion and debate conveys a strong message that this work is taken seriously and that people's time, effort and commitment are valued.

### Everybody's business

Establishing strong links between inclusive enquiry, leadership and learning enables schools to develop an inbuilt capacity for improvement. This has distinctive characteristics for each organisation, therefore each project or programme needs a bespoke design and often a very organic process of development, underpinned by dialogue. At the heart must be a strong and unrelenting emphasis on children's learning (in the broadest, deepest sense) and an understanding of processes of change, in order to reach a shared understanding of what improvement means and how change happens, for us, in our school. It may even require us to challenge and reconceptualise our notions of 'school'. We must make sure that this is everybody's business, and that everybody benefits.

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#### Notes

1. The ideas in this section are derived from research and development work which has been the subject of a number of publications; see the following for more detailed explanations, case studies and teachers' accounts: Durrant and Holden, 2006; Durrant, 2005 and 2007; Frost and Durrant, 2002 and 2003.
2. The project will be fully reported and evaluated in a forthcoming paper for the British Educational Research Association annual conference, 2010.

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