Using research to promote equity within education

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Possible stances

• Research in relation to the agendas of practitioners

• Research into school practices in relation to the agendas of researchers

• Research into school practices (and the practices of researchers) in relation to the agendas of practitioners and researchers
Development and research

- An analysis of particular contexts in order to identify and address barriers to participation and learning
- Led from within schools by teams of teachers, using collaborative action research methods
- Involving powerful forms of school-based professional development
- Connecting schools through partnerships and networks
- Support provided by external researchers
Example 1: Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools

• A Collaborative Action Research Network within the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme

• A three-year programme of research carried out within a network of 25 schools in three local authorities

• Supported and monitored by small teams of researchers from three universities

Some lessons

• Collaborative action research was difficult in the policy context, particularly when the goal was whole school development

• Certain approaches provided useful ‘interruptions’ to existing thinking

• Such interruptions helped to identify overlooked possibilities for moving practice forward

• ‘Outsiders’ played significant roles in supporting such activities
Mapping the research strategy
- Two linked research cycles -

DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS AND LEA

Existing school and LEA contexts and practices

Existing school development plans and LEA education development plan

Self-review, generating and using evidence, with attention to a wide range of perspectives

Reframing the school development plan and LEA education development plan

Development of practice

UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Existing understanding and experience of inclusion

Research questions
- What barriers to pupil participation and learning?
- What practices overcome these barriers?
- Do these practices facilitate improved learning outcomes?
- How to encourage and sustain practice in LEA and schools?

Ongoing construction of school and LEA accounts

Developing theoretical understanding of the development of inclusive practice: new questions
Example 2: An equity research network

• A local authority with a hierarchy of selective, faith and comprehensive schools

• Fourteen secondary schools working together to develop a greater capacity for responding to learners who lose out within current arrangements

• Support provided by a team of university researchers over five years, funded by schools

The Network agenda

• Which learners are most vulnerable to underachievement, marginalisation or exclusion in our schools?

• What changes in policy and practice need to be made in order to reach out to these students?

• How can these changes be introduced effectively and evaluated in respect to student outcomes?
The Development and Research process

• Research teams of staff members set up in each school
• Teams work closely with university researchers to investigate the experiences of students who lose out
• Evidence gathering: analyzing statistics, observations, student views, interviews, photography
• Challenging and developing practice: report writing, dissemination at whole school staff meetings
• Within and across school meetings to share experiences and provide mutual support
Examples of school enquiries

• *Mobility* - significant numbers of students change school between Years 7 and 11

• *Underachievement* – ‘middle ability’ learners are underachieving, increasingly disaffected and many drop out post-16

• *Attendance* – a large number of students choose not to take part in school

• *Invisibility* – some students go unnoticed, being neither outstanding nor challenging
Some lessons

• Schools have untapped potential to improve themselves in ways that reach out to all of their students

• This requires increased collaboration in order to make better use of existing expertise

• An engagement with data of various types as a catalyst for professional learning

• Schools supporting one another in moving practice forward

• Leadership that creates the organizational climate that supports such movement
An ecology of equity

• *Within schools* - issues that arise as a result of school and teacher practices

• *Between schools* - issues that arise from the characteristics of the local school system.

• *Beyond schools* - issues related to the wider context within which schools operate
Example 3: Promoting equity in schools: collaboration, inquiry and ethical leadership

- A network of schools in Queensland, supported by eight university researchers, over three years, with funding from the Australian Research Council

- Regular school visits and occasional workshops for teachers

- Meetings with school principals

- The production of accounts of practice

Making the familiar unfamiliar

• The voice of authority, as indicated in policy documents and accountability systems

• The voice of school leaders as they seek to move their schools forward within existing policy pressures

• The voice of practitioners who find themselves dealing with competing expectations

• The voice of students who experience the way policies are interpreted and enacted within classrooms

• The voice of networks of schools as they seek to achieve the best possible outcomes for all students
Plus, the voice of researchers

Providing:

- Knowledge of disciplined inquiry methods
- Evidence from more formal research regarding the themes with which schools are engaging
- A challenging perspective through their stance as critical friends to the schools
- Evaluative accounts of practice that are intended to draw out the lessons
A Collaborative Investigation of Equity-Driven Evidence-Based School Reform

Strand 1: Practice
- On-going School Development
- Planning
- Acting
- Observing
- Reflecting
- Improvements in Knowledge, Practice and Outcomes

Strand 2: Understanding
- Research Questions
- Evidence
- Accounts & Analysis
- Contributions to knowledge

The research design
Features of the model

• A process of knowledge-generation that occurs when researcher and practitioner knowledge meet in particular sites.

• Aimed at producing new knowledge about ways in which broad values might better be realized in future practice.

• The coming together of different kinds of knowledge embodied in real encounters.

• Involves new forms of relationship between practitioners and researchers.

• Members of research teams both conduct research and are the subjects of research, as their thinking and practices are examined by themselves and others.
Some final thoughts

• Successful partnerships involve a complex social process within which colleagues with very different experiences learn how to learn from these differences.

• A messy social learning process, within which researcher expertise and perspectives are brought together with the knowledge of practitioners.

• Where this works, it leads to the development of new, context-specific knowledge that can support change processes.
Implications

‘Teachers need to change their view that teaching is a personal and private activity and adopt the more risky but rewarding view that teaching is a professional activity that can be continuously improved if it is made public and examined openly.’

‘Researchers need to move from undervaluing the knowledge teachers acquire in their own classrooms to recognizing the potential of personal knowledge as it becomes transformed into professional knowledge.’