

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for Leadership of Schools
and Children's Services

Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary Report

Tracey O'Brien

Deputy Headteacher, Southfields Community College, Wandsworth,
South London

Resource

On the road

The action learning set (ALS) journey towards
becoming a research-engaged school

Spring 2010

Introduction

The full report explores from a leadership perspective one approach to setting up research communities within a school – the implementation of a formal approach to action research in a large, challenging inner-city comprehensive school through the use of action learning sets (ALS), sometimes known in educational literature as ‘professional learning communities’.

Its key research questions were:

- Can research engagement have a positive effect on teaching and learning within a school?
- Why should a school move towards being more research engaged?
- How can engaging staff in collaboration and action research be an effective form of continuing professional development (CPD)?
- Do teachers value dialogue in ALS as a useful professional activity?

Approximately 20 ALS were designed to run over four half terms with topics either emerging from priorities in the school improvement plan or born from staff interest. ALS participation involved meeting with a group of up to eight fellow professionals with a shared interest in an aspect of teaching and learning for four twilight sessions over a half term. Each group was facilitated by an appointed ‘learning leader’. The group would discuss, try out a few things in the classroom, reflect and feed back. The learning leader would then add some theory such as reading an article by a leading light on the topic and share some practice or case studies

carried out elsewhere. At the end of the ALS experience, new ideas, proposals and policies could be put forward or further research carried out. Essentially it was seen as an opportunity for high quality CPD, led by professionals based in classrooms for professionals based in classrooms, to improve the quality of teaching and learning for students.

Methodology

The research study chronicles the journey of the design, implementation and evaluation of this CPD initiative that engaged around 60 staff in practitioner action research focused through ALS. Data was collected at the inception, implementation and concluding phases of the project. Some of these data collection opportunities were more formative and done at various key points throughout the year. Some were more summative in nature and were carried out at the end of the project lifetime. Findings were captured through the following evaluation methods:

- personal reflective journaling by the researcher (herself the senior deputy headteacher with responsibility for CPD in the school)
- discussions with an initial focus group and the advanced skills teacher focus group
- semi-structured interviews with six learning leaders
- external evaluation through a Training and Development Agency (TDA) mid-project report
- summative end of project questionnaire to all staff engaged in the ALS over the year

Findings

Can research engagement have a positive effect on teaching and learning within a school?

Staff commitment initially ranged from the really enthusiastic, through those who wanted to know ‘what’s in it for me’, to the completely uninterested, yet by the end of a year’s experience, over 90 per cent said that they would welcome the ALS mechanism as an effective method of CPD delivery. Over 80 per cent agreed that they felt membership of an ALS to have had a positive impact on their teaching and learning practice, as evidenced by comments from staff such as:

“It enabled me to experiment successfully, giving students more responsibility, making lessons more interesting and increasing enjoyment.”

“The work on emotional intelligence meant I have learned a lot about myself and my students and has led me to have a better relationship with some individuals.”

“It was great to be thinking about how to teach again.”

Why should a school move towards being more research engaged?

From the final evaluation questionnaire to participating staff, it was found that 94 per cent of staff believed all teachers should be engaged in small-scale action

research and that 94 per cent also believed that all school leaders should also be engaged in small-scale action research. This reinforces the view that if a school is to be truly seen as learning-centred, then the whole school community should be engaged in learning and needs to be seen to be.

In terms of trying to change the school’s ethos into becoming a learning-centred, research-engaged school, the ALS experience has enabled the school to take a huge step on this journey. However, better ways of disseminating some of the research findings need to be developed so that they can be shared more widely within the school community and across the wider local area.

How can engaging staff in collaboration and action research be an effective form of CPD?

An interim TDA evaluation report found that the project demonstrated the following characteristics of effective CPD provision:

- specifying a focus and goal for CPD activity aligned to clear timescales
- including a focus on pupil outcomes in CPD activity
- engaging with a variety of CPD opportunities
- providing time for reflection and feedback
- supporting collaborative approaches to CPD
- developing strategic leadership of CPD

This was reinforced by positive comments made by participating staff such as:

“The ALS allowed freedom to choose my area of professional development.... I liked the fact that I could choose things that were more relevant to me and I was interested in.”

“The ALS has been the most effective way of moving theoretical ideas to practical ones.... I liked the fact that I went away, tested the learning/idea out and came back to the group to discuss and then improve.”

“I found it to be extremely useful, providing a good opportunity for both independent and collaborative study.”

Some concerns were expressed, however, regarding lack of focus in some cases, additional workload implications and the need for a longer participation time span.

From these snapshot staff comments and the other evaluative data collected, it is possible to conclude that this type of CPD is regarded by staff as being an effective form of CPD.

Do teachers value dialogue in ALS as a useful professional activity?

All staff involved agreed that they valued the engagement in ALS for giving them professional time and space to talk to other colleagues. Participants in this project indicated that they valued ‘dialogue’ as a professional activity:

“I think it is invaluable to have the time to sit and have discussions with other teachers and share good practice and ideas.”

“The ALS provided a discussion forum which was cross-curricular, thought-provoking, included personal targets, informed good practice, encouraged risk-taking and offered a supportive atmosphere.”

Conclusion

Experience on which to draw in journeying towards being a more research-engaged school.

Before embarking on the journey:

- Establish clarity of purpose and identification of desired outcomes.
- Establish a collective knowledge base: identify what is already known in this area from literature review and research.
- Establish evaluation methods from the outset: who will contribute, what data will be collected, when and how?
- Establish participant ownership of the initiative through promulgation of clear purpose, levels of anticipated time commitment, inclusivity of involvement.
- Establish leadership protocols:
 - audit levels of extant knowledge among potential learning leaders
 - identify required training and development inputs
 - identify appropriate support mechanisms.
- Establish operational details:
 - time frame and time commitment
 - common recording, monitoring and feedback systems
 - realistic outcome milestones.
- Establish systems in advance for effective dissemination of outcomes through networks both within and beyond the school.

While the journey is in progress:

- **Encourage** a number of staff to become engaged in some sort of action research.
- **Excite** others by allowing these staff to champion and showcase their work.
- **Envision** the culture of the 'learning community' your school is to become and promulgate it.
- **Establish** the CPD activity to be as well structured as possible so that it seems 'easy' to others to engage in.
- **Explain** this new activity as a 'growth model' – not just 'yet another meeting'.
- **Evaluate** ongoing progress, having faith in your professionals to act professionally, but building in structures to ensure compliance.
- **Extend** across subjects and beyond the school.

Download this summary and the full report by visiting:
www.nationalcollege.org.uk/researchassociates

The website also provides further information about the programme including:
- current projects
- other full research and summary reports
- becoming a research associate

The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services is committed to excellence and dedicated to inclusiveness. We exist to develop and inspire great leaders of schools, early years settings and children's services. We share the same ambition – to make a positive difference to the lives of children and young people.

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

©2010 National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services – All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior permission from the National College. To reuse this material, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at the National College or email publications@nationalcollege.org.uk

Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk
www.nationalcollege.org.uk