

## LEADING INNOVATION AND CHANGE

### ‘Transformational practice - raising aspirations in educational leadership’

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#### **Abstract**

*Building capacity for improvement at whole school level is an indispensable aspect of sustainable and transformational leadership practice in education. This model for leading innovation and change sought to facilitate shared knowledge construction, giving teachers as both learners and leaders a voice.*

*Participants undertook action research within the school setting through reflection in, and on, action as a substantive feature of this inquiry led approach to professional development. Their case studies allowed a critical review and authentication of their pathways to innovation and change.*

*Data (case studies) authenticated leading innovation and change as a successful approach to enhancing school effectiveness. Thus through these case studies in transformational leadership, learners (leaders, teachers and students) assumed greater control of their environment and their own and others' learning.*

*Practitioner research - learning reflectively through a holistic approach to school transformation, characteristically is seen to be developing self-supporting citizens (learners).*

**Keywords: (3 keywords)** transformational practices; practitioner research;

#### **Introduction**

Leading Innovation and Change (LIAC) is a capacity building agent for continuing professional development through which we aspire to scaffold communities of enquiry. This paper outlines the ethos, process and impact of this personal and professional development opportunity for teachers and leaders in

schools. Leading Innovation and Change as a professional development tool brings to life teachers' own scholarship; their first person research. The recent review of Teachers' Standards in England reiterated this point, suggesting that the master teacher would:

*“engage with and contribute to professional networks beyond the school”*

and

*“ that they are analytical in evaluating and developing their own craft and knowledge, making full use of continuing professional development and appropriate research”.*

DfE, 2011

This supports a model of what Reason (2001) describes as the inevitable assimilation of inquiry and practice into our everyday conduct in knowledge establishments. In agreeing with Hargreaves (2005) in believing that each and every intellect is needed to respond to, up skill, reshape and meet the frequent and sometimes overpowering challenges in schools we, at St Mary's, make claims to empower leaders, teachers and learners.

Two considerations drive our agenda; firstly that teachers engage with all in their knowledge based organisations, both as leaders of learning (for peers, leadership teams and pupils) and as learners themselves. Secondly, that the need for change is recognised as fundamental for school improvement and that change itself is varied and unique. In the knowledge of this paradigm St Mary's engages communities of enquiry in a practitioner research model that demonstrates impact on individual practice and at a whole school level.

Our understanding of leadership is as important to this model of effective change in schools as it is to the schools themselves. Furthermore, and fundamentally, our objective to ensure:

*“ the provision of training and continuing professional development for teachers in both religious and secular schools”*

*(St Mary's University College, Mission statement, 2011)*

sustains our purpose to raise aspirations, inform leadership and to impact on classroom practice.

Leaders, teachers, learners – one of the most important facets of the Leading Innovation and Change programme is the challenge to participants and to our own understanding of the interchangeability of these roles. We can easily associate with recognisable representations of school leaders, for example; the shared sense of purpose that is the source of sustainable leadership (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006) and the power of the moral leadership advocated by West-Burnham (2009). Nonetheless, Hargreaves' (2005) allusion to the crisis of leadership in our society suggests that the construct and enactment of leadership roles remains a societal and educational issue. By utilising the distributive leadership model we think the impact on schooling is heightened. Leadership employed across a classroom and subsequently throughout a school promotes effective schooling because, as in our communities of enquiry, clusters of teachers are empowered to instigate school improvement.

The distributive leadership model underpinning the LIAC MA programme finds support in a range of literature, including the work of Harris and Muijs (2005), Davies (2005), Coles and Southworth (2005), Hartley (2007), Harris (2003, 2004) and MacBeath (2005). Fullan (2003), moreover, suggests that informed professional practice is collective rather than individualistic. The implication from these models and the moral imperative driving our own approach is to empower and engage educators at all levels of the profession in their own and others' learning. Through our 'teacher friendly' programme individual school improvement agendas provide the starting point for teacher development. The leadership practices of teachers are encouraged wherever they are found in the organisation.

## Action Research

The data or cases presented in this paper are reflective of cohorts from the preceding eight years. They are indicative of a range of research approaches, within the paradigm of self reflective action research and are not examined from the perspective of the rigour of the research but as a representation of the impact of this professional growth model in the school setting. In making claims to empower leaders, teachers and learners, we utilise communities of enquiry in a practitioner research model that affects individual practice in whole school contexts (Costello, 2003). This interdependence between professional growth and school improvement validates Busher's (2002) argument that successful change needs to be based on improving teaching and learning. That such a process is unique and different for each individual enables teachers to identify what matters to them and thereby strive towards their own aspirations.

Teaching, as we know, is a complex activity and functions as a key agent of change. Notions of change often focus on the torrent of policy and strategy documentation that marks government discourse on education and standards. For many this is perceived as unwanted, significant and imposed change. The upshot of this is the often reactionary behaviour of teachers and the diverse responses of school leaders to either shield school and staff from imposed diktats or to rigidly interpret all edicts. Sustainable school improvement and by association school effectiveness is not generated by such approaches. Nevertheless, paraphrasing Stoll, Fink and Earl (2003); we have a choice; we can either prepare children for *our past or for their future*; which would you prefer? Parents, politicians and even teachers often reject change because it was 'different in their day' – well let's hope so since the world we now live in is certainly very different from the our childhood world of the 1960's, 1970's, 1980's and even the 1990s. We may not need sweeping reorganisation, new policy or grandiose political change, but we do need teachers to be allowed to teach the pupils and for the pupils to be able to learn in their personalised and unique ways. Certainly, Fullan (2003) gives credence to the precept that it is the 'little things' that really matter. Such tenets endorse a focus on individual and collective endeavours in communities of enquiry. In this way leadership allows the realisation of individuals' potential within each of our partnership schools. Accordingly, Leading Innovation and Change is not a management tool but explicates the complex cultural shift needed to effect sustainable educational change.

John West-Burnham's (2009) stance that education is in need of reform and that those best placed to reform are those providing the education is a constituent component of our rationale. Appropriately therefore, empowering professionals, be they beginner teachers, advanced practitioners – those aspiring to the new master teacher concept, or aspiring and established leaders, is an aim of the Leading Innovation and Change programme. The praxis of our MA programmes involves clusters of practitioners, teachers and leaders, in schools utilising a framework that demonstrates impact; challenging and changing their own and others' practice exactly as West-Burnham (2009) advocates. Logan (2010) in evaluating the LIAC programme for the Training and Development Agency (TDA), makes the point that in theory rich masters programmes learning doesn't necessarily transcend other areas without the commitment of a senior manager. Yet in the LIAC model a critical mass of five or more teachers in a school has a real impact on both learning climate and practice.

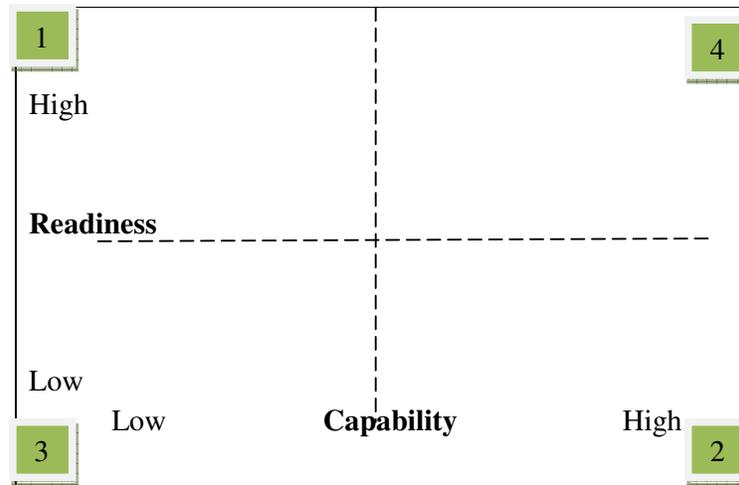
It might be considered a disadvantage of this model of school improvement that it necessitates the support of the Headteacher. As gatekeeper to the staff and the funding (current economic concerns notwithstanding) they remain a powerful part of the innovation and change dynamic. Yet despite Todhunter's (2001) assertion that Headteachers don't always appreciate the full implications of the potential they allow to run free when teachers engage in self reflective action research, our experience is that many of those same Headteachers play an proactive part in their communities of enquiry. Whether this is to constrain the degree and context of change or to amplify it remains unclear.

In this distinctive climate clusters of teachers engage in projects that utilise a teacher's own values and passion. The transformational quality of devolved ownership of personal learning through reflection in and reflection on action has been a substantive feature of this inquiry led approach to professional development. While the idea of practitioner research has varied (Pritchard, 2002) from that of simply understanding our practice to the search for that which will improve our practice our model is clearly premised upon the latter. This draws a parallel with West-Burnham's (2009) concern for school improvement. Traditional approaches to effective schooling – perhaps driven by government agendas - seek to improve a system that continues, according to West-Burnham (2009), to disadvantage and disempower significant numbers of the learning community. Fullan (2003) suggests, and we concur, that sustainable school improvement and by association school effectiveness is not stimulated by approaches that often impose the change associated with and driven by (government) policy. This notion of 'push' systems of change described by Clegg & Walsh (2004) as driven by policy and management is challenged by our case studies authors who evoke 'pull' approaches, where change is promoted and pulled through by the users (Thompson, 2010). Standardised and proscribed approaches to schooling are not recognised as the solution to raising standards (Harris, 2005). Consequently, Gladwell's (2000) suggestion that the incremental change that occurs as teachers engage in professional growth activities will gradually spread to the masses – in these cases staff in an institution – endorses a focus on the individual within communities of enquiry. As Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) observe, power is given to those who can inspire, not simply those in management positions.

Teacher research embraces many nomenclatures including action research, community-based, participatory and collaborative. It does have at its heart the two principles: parity in the knowledge process and the promotion of change. Our practitioner researchers understand their research as integral to what they do in the ordinary course of events while seeking to review and improve their practice. But the model of leading innovation and change provides further challenge for teachers as purveyors of knowledge – expecting practitioners to advance beyond the concept of 'school knowledge', designated by Schön (1995) as knowledge contained in the curriculum and minds of the teachers (to be passed to pupils). Aspirational learners are as indispensable to sustainable and transformational school improvement as inspirational leaders. This model of educational change asks participants as learners not just to reflect but to act in Reason's (2001) words 'choicefully'.

If we accept such a premise then the readiness and capability of an individual, more than the organisation, to accept and work in an environment of change is key to the effectiveness of such change (West-Burnham, 2009). Concern for effectiveness – ineffectiveness, highlighted by Stoll (1998), and later through West-Burnham's (2009) model of readiness and capability (figure 1) enables us to understand and reconcile the impact and direction of professional growth.

Figure 1



(Adapted from West-Burnham, 2009. pg 127).

As figure 1 illustrates, participants can be high in readiness but low in capacity – keen but with limited knowledge (1) or highly engaged and with commensurate expertise and skills (4). Professional growth occurs for all but the efficacy and sustainability of change will be dependent upon the number of teachers engaging at sector 4. The distributive leadership model underpinning our leading innovation and professional growth programmes empower individuals and thereby the organisation to move towards sector 4. Accordingly, by embracing the professional growth of all staff the leadership practices of teachers are encouraged wherever they are found in the organisation. This approach finds support in a range of literature, including the work of Harris and Muijs (2005), Macbeath, (2005 & 2008), Spillane, Diamond, Sherer & Coldren (2005), Hartley (2007) and Harris (2003, 2004).

Through the generation of a culture of challenge and encouragement, our model for leading innovation and change facilitates shared knowledge construction between leaders and teachers and between students and teachers, giving both learners and leaders a voice. This notion of voice is, quite rightly, a focus of research and discourse and giving pupils a voice in their learning environs is key to these debates. However, we are also mindful of the need to trumpet the voices of the teachers. Peter Logan (2010) the original programme leader, reminds us of the need to listen to the voices of teachers. Indeed, Macbeath (2008) warns us that empowerment, in idealising the voice of the child, lessens opportunities to hear the voice of the teacher.

Suitably therefore, the leading innovation and change experience broadcasts teacher voices through the medium of action research. In this context we are informed by the work of Professor Jean McNiff. McNiff and Whitehead (2005) ask teachers to do more than reflect on practice, to do more than reflect to improve learning, suggesting that we have an infinite capacity to create new forms of knowledge. Ultimately, this is the challenge of action research – to reflect on our practice and to use that reflection to generate new ideas, theories and knowledge.

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) make clear their understanding that action research is about educators who are ‘morally committed’ (p24) and who aspire to their own values in practice. This is a construct of self reflective practice that Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) ascribe to those of us – like teachers seeking to effect change in their practice – who seek purpose and social justice through our actions. In exposing ourselves to risk – in that the outcomes of the research are ongoing and changing – the cycle of

transformative outcomes and changing practice can be frightening to power holders who are no longer in charge of the knowledge such a transformative process produces – Headteachers take heed.

Politics and policy notwithstanding, the LIAC programme enables teachers to undertake action research in areas relevant to their roles while addressing the development priorities of their school. However, what we find and what our Case Studies illustrate is that the clusters of learners engaged in mutual enquiry, a group approach advocated by Reason (2001), are having a sustainable impact on *whole school* innovation and improvement.

Literature and experience suggest that the action research approach embraced by our practitioner researchers is perceived by some as a panacea for effective schooling. This clearly is not the case, what makes for effective praxis – teaching or researching – is those engaged in that pursuit. While we passionately and deliberately focus on self reflective study we are not so rigid in our beliefs as to negate opportunities for continuing professional learning that reflect a diversity of research philosophies. This standpoint is endorsed by Ladkin's (2004) interpretation that even within the paradigm of action research there is no right or wrong way of doing it. Thus, while action research can enhance the lived educational experience for all participants Costello (2003) makes the point that action research can also be perceived as a way of fixing a problem. Accordingly, we do not encourage the assumption that there was a problem with teaching and learning practice. Reflective practitioners don't need a problem to fix; they need a cyclical process of enrichment.

Nevertheless, the notion of transformative research, of effecting change through action research is sustained by Swann in considering action research an appropriate approach "*where the final outcome is undefined*" (2002, p.58). One of the factors that participants, even those 'pushed' into the LIAC programme by their leadership teams, acknowledge, is that teachers and students are equipped with an extended language with which to share and express their values, that the research transfers control over learning and has led to enhanced levels of pupil engagement in learning

We, as with many other advocates of self reflection, adopt the pattern suggested by Swann (2002) among many others; thus plan, act, observe, and reflect are repeated patterns, enabling practitioners to be guided through cycles of reflection and change. We find that teachers' self reflections and action research take various forms. In many ways these complexities mirror the '*inner and outer arcs of attention*' suggested by Marshall (2001, p434) – how emotions, thoughts and feelings affect the perceptions of the researchers – how researchers appreciate complex whole school issues as they arise and help them conceive rational responses to them. According to Winter (1998) new knowledge is part of this emergent process and to facilitate this the research tools our participants utilise are practical, focused on change, cyclical and invariably lead to participation by groups involved in the setting (Costello 2003).

In certain respects Winter's representation of action research, placing researchers and research participants "*in a single community of interested colleagues*" (1996, p.14), holds true for many of our participants, yet the LIAC programme allows a more global engagement. This is a factor considered important by the UCET (Universities Council for Education of Teachers) collaborative group if we, as teacher educators, are to have impact on policy makers and policy decisions. While the data (case studies) authenticates pathways to innovation and change and learners (leaders, teachers and students) have assumed more control of their environment and learning thereby demonstrating an increased capacity to learn and to employ meta-narratives about their learning, the global impact of such practice remains untested. The hard truth is that politicians and policy makers prefer statistics. If on the other hand we can develop a critical mass of data relating to action research and self reflective practice, educationalists can then lobby more cogently for the innovation and change that we know stimulates sustainable effective schooling, not just short term results.

The case studies explored here substantiate the impact of this leading innovation programme on both individuals' professional growth and the professional growth of their institution since our model ensures a relationship between change and school improvement plans. Regardless of their received status within the school, leaders of learning must reassure others in their institutions that forsaking preferred approaches for new ideas is not something to be afraid of (Schlecty, 2001).

## Case studies

### **Case Study A: Caspar (2005) - School Improvement via Student Voice.**

Caspar's (2005) study considers the capacity for student voice to have a transformative effect in a secondary school in West London. 'Increased voice' is a key concept of the LIAC programme and Caspar (2005)'s research illustrates the very real whole school impact practitioner research can have. While Caspar (2005) was positioned within the community of enquiry at her school, her study was conducted from the perspective of her role as the sole teacher delivering Citizenship to Key Stage 3 pupils across the whole school.

While adopting a social justice perspective, Caspar (2005) noted the perceived risk of inviting student voices into the process of school improvement, viewed with some trepidation by pupils and staff. Caspar (2005) effectively used both Hart's (1992) Ladder of Young Peoples' Participation and Treseder's (1997) Degrees of Participation model to illustrate the flexibility of leadership and pupil engagement needed to really democratise pupil involvement in school improvement. In her study Caspar (2005) challenges notions of school effectiveness, suggesting that if, as implied by Harris (2005), school improvement is perceived by senior management to be dominated by issues of control and procedure then this is anti democratic, excludes pupils and neglects the cultural dimensions of 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling in England.

As indicated, Caspar's (2005) LIAC study actualised social justice leading students to the belief that their voice should and could be heard. Caspar's (2005) work was carried out in an atmosphere of school self evaluation and is an example of how one practitioner researcher can inspire change among peers, senior staff and pupils leading to a more effective learning environment. Pupils felt listened to and more significantly heard, while senior management accepted positive and negative data and dealt with pupil injustices. Illustrating empowerment for ordinary teachers, Caspar's (2005) work reinforces the construct of school improvement as a strategy for educational change that enhances student outcomes, validating student voice as transformative.

### **Case Study B: Bacon (2009) - Moving towards greater independent learning at sixth form level**

Bacon's (2009) study truly reflects the action research potential of LIAC practitioner research. For Bacon (2009) impact on school improvement plans is ongoing, persisting beyond individual classrooms and her final academic paper, receiving sustained attention from the school leadership team. The setting for the research was a school improvement plan of a West London faith based school focusing on a whole school culture of learning to learn through the Building Learning Power programme advanced by Claxton (2006). Bacon's (2009) analysis of the school identified staff and student frustration regarding the lack of independent learning skills acquired by sixth formers. Knowledge of the issue is one step in the cycle of action research. Bacon (2009) espouses an understanding of change management issues as advocated by Fullan (2001) - the need to 'reculture' for sustainable change. In a renewable cycle of practitioner research Bacon (2009) exposes a more in depth understanding of the independent learner skills and accompanying frustrations across the whole sixth form. Following each period of research changes to professional development and whole school policy become evident and are still ongoing. Not only do we see evidence of

change in progress and cyclical change throughout the whole school, but we see a developing engagement among staff, inspired by a colleague to consider and challenge traditional ideas of learning in the sixth form setting.

School improvement plans are viewed by the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) (committee communication 10/06/2010) as one of the most significant policy developments of recent years. What is apparent from Bacon's (2009) research is that effective schooling will be inspired and sustained when 'chalkface' (teachers working in the classroom) teachers are engaged in leading innovation and change.

### **Case Study C: Carr-Brown (2007) - The Butterfly Project: An investigation into underachievement, behaviour and motivation.**

Carr-Brown's (2007) research approaches school improvement from a more personal practitioner context: a concern over the validity of the school's behaviour policy and the impact of behavioural issues on her own lessons. Committed to the community of enquiry established in an Inner London school through the school's involvement in the LIAC programme, the identification of an established policy which needed to be 'brought to life' provided the stimulus for this practitioner research. Carr-Brown (2009) was motivated by the opportunity as a teacher to be a leader in implementing change for school improvement. From its initial small scale focus the research cycle evolved and was subsumed by senior management to stimulate a rejuvenation of the whole school behaviour policy. As with Caspar's (2005) study, Carr-Brown's (2007) research echo's the triangulation of voices – leader – teacher - pupil- influencing school improvement and effective schooling.

### **Case Study D: Heath (2005) – Values Aspired Teaching ‘ bringing values to the forefront of education**

Heath's (2005) research is set within a community of learners in a London primary school. Her research seeks to endorse a values based education and as such is a reflective practitioner approach that sustains the belief in a moral purpose espoused by West-Burnham (2009) and sustained by the mission of the University College. Heath's (2005) research demonstrates how individual passion can inspire the reflective practice of others. Based on Kohlberg's Levels of Moral Development this study explored the perceptions and actions of teachers, their struggles with inadequate resources and their use of cross curricular approaches to deliver values based learning for pupils. Teacher's ability to tinker with the curriculum and its delivery is identified by Stoll (1995) as just the sort of action research that ultimately supports the whole school. By supporting unique and individual practice change is enabled. As Stoll (1995, p5) says '*no-one is more important to school improvement than a teacher*'.

These case studies exemplify the deep impact leading innovation and change as a process and a programme has had and continues to have on partner schools and the leaders, teachers and pupils learning therein. The delimitations of such communities are infinite since Leithwood and Jantzi's (2005) observation gives credibility to the global dimensions of our professional growth model now expanded to blended learning approaches and in use in Malaysia, Asia and Mauritius. Our claim to impact in our South African programme, a not inconsiderable assertion, evolved from both individual and group practitioner research. The *Khayelitsha teachers* describe how this intervention saved the careers of teachers and the educational experiences of their pupils. In their own words, "*you have helped teach us and we are ready to help others*" (Graduation Class, *Khayelitsha*, 2009). These teachers exemplify a provision that transcends simple professional competence, challenging the educator to learn reflectively and collaboratively and change culturally, demanding more from their own values and practice. This intervention has further devolved into a validated international distance learning model of professional growth (SMUC, 2010),

thereby acknowledging the *raison d'être* for a distributed learning model that empowers and gives voice to *all* those engaged in pedagogical practice, research and, ultimately, a voyage of self discovery (Angus, 2004).

### Conclusion

In presenting case studies that point to improved performance and to profound change in our partnership schools, we remain mindful of Williamson and Prosser 's (2002) observation that one of the pitfalls of action research is sustaining momentum. Current research projects are exploring the nature of sustainable whole school improvement linked to the impact of the Leading Innovation and Change programme. Nevertheless, this inquiry led rather than content driven approach acknowledges the important contribution teacher research and high quality professional development can make to school improvement. In some cases staff are 'motivated' to join the community of enquiry by their senior leadership team and adopt a negative and resistant approach – but only initially. The lived story of a head of department at an Inner London school, a reluctant enquirer – in her third start on a master's programme when she joined us – now confidently writing and presenting at conferences, successfully completing the MA in Education (LIAC), empowered and empowering others through her own reflective practice and who is currently undertaking her EdD, gives credence to the sustainability and ongoing impact of professional development.

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