

Engaging teachers means engaged students

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To encourage and help teachers become more involved and enthusiastic about "inclusive teaching", the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) recently funded an action research based project. Action research can be explained as making changes and studying the impact of those changes in order to bring about an environment where students feel included in their learning process.

According to the project's Co-director Dr Susan Davies, of Trinity College, Carmarthen, "Action research is an opportunity for teachers to look at their practice, reflect on it, and improve on it."

Dr Davies explained "Good action research can enable teachers to see their pupils differently and be a step towards creating a richer pupil-teacher relationship, which challenges the limitations of current teaching methods. For this to happen, there needs to be a model of action research which involves teachers developing shared ownership of an issue, taking action and paying attention to the consequences for pupils' engagement."

As part of the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), the project sought to explore how this approach could be used to assist teachers to put into practice the principle of 'inclusion' i.e. to increase the participation and achievement of pupils who may be marginalised as a result of circumstances such as disability, ethnicity, gender and social disadvantage.

The starting point for the TLRP project is that many secondary school

teachers are unfamiliar with action research, and may be reluctant to become involved because it can be perceived as unfamiliar and too difficult. The researchers found that, unless teachers were given a real sense of ownership, action research became just another imposition on their time and energy. However, if that ownership was successfully developed, then teachers' energy and creativity was released.

Working with seven schools in Wales and England, the outcomes revealed that:

- collaborative action research can help engage all their pupils in learning,
- action research, as an aid to inclusion, can be stimulated by giving teachers a strong sense of ownership of the research and its outcomes, and
- the role of school leaders and educational psychologists as the research facilitators is crucial to the success of using action research to stimulate inclusive teaching.
- asking questions about how a school adapts to and works with the diversity of its student population,
- finding out about, and working with, what pupils bring with them to school rather than viewing differences in terms of deficits, and
- taking account of the understandings that young people have of school and education, rather than seeking only to engage more young people in existing school practice.

Dr Davies continued: "Conceived in this way, inclusion is not a quick fix that can be bolted on, but requires ongoing dialogue between teachers

and learners. It requires teachers' active engagement, because inclusion and exclusion are processes that happen minute by minute and lesson by lesson. Also, crucially, senior management needs to appreciate this is a practice that needs to be given space to happen."

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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