Leading Classroom-Based Enquiry 1

Warwick Institute of Education

Case Study 2: Re-thinking support for disaffected pupils

This second case study concerns Shaun, a teacher of history who was considering moving jobs. The school responded quickly, they did not want to lose him and offered him a salary increment if he would take on a project they had been considering on motivation of low achievers in Y 11. Pupils of very different abilities, attitudes and backgrounds attended the school including a noticeable group of disaffected pupils who were low attaining and causing disciplinary problems in several classes. He realised this was going to be a challenging project and one concerning an issue he had not thought deeply about. But there were attractions. It was an additional responsibility, it brought another salary increment and it would provide some variety in his job. He was given time within a new timetable to support teachers or run further sessions with pupils. He decided to refocus the project on low achievers rather than underachievement or behaviour management per se though the two had become closely bound together in the minds of most teachers he spoke to. He identified a group of pupils who he would monitor and support. He put together profiles of these pupils, and tracked their progress and behaviour in lessons. He interviewed both the pupils and the teachers who taught them. He found that pupils had a very low threshold in class before feelings of frustration and exclusion took over. Teachers addressed this by 'preparing for containment', for example getting pupils to complete a wordsearch or simple worksheet, something he knew from his own experience.

He tried to take a fresh look at teaching these pupils. One problem was that lessons were invariably based on text exercises which pupils found repetitive and boring. He and

his colleagues would need to provide greater variety in lessons and activities which were more adventurous but carefully targeted. They would need to be more sensitive to language difficulties. He developed and supported a study skills programme including the use of mind mapping activities to help pupils organise their thoughts on a topic. Responding to pupils' suggestions he developed some group work scenarios and role plays. He explained some of this work to his colleagues and asked if he could support them by helping to introduce new approaches in their lessons. He evaluated the results of the project at half termly intervals using interviews with teachers, with pupils and through school data such as truancy and attendance. Some aspects of the support programme fell flat but overall the results were impressive though he was honest enough to say that they were almost bound to be as pupils were being supported with extra help. There was a considerable spin off in the rest of his teaching. He routinely prepared for variety in his lessons and paid much closer attention to supporting pupils in their language difficulties. He became a very different teacher to the one he started the year as.

Commentary

Shaun's scenario differs from Sally's as he was specifically asked by the school to take on a formal responsibility within the school. He was being asked to take a fresh look both at his role in school and his approach to teaching. When it came to innovation within teaching, Shaun, like Sally, needed to find his own stance on an innovation, in his case to redefine the target group for the project and to develop a pupil centred solution. Like Sally, Shaun took pains to evaluate his work – something which obviously had to be done in a collaborative manner as he was working with other teachers. Again like Sally, what had started as quite a small innovation led to a significant change in how he planned his teaching.

Both Shaun's and Sally's projects involved a lot more detailed planning and work than can be considered here, but together they provide lessons for thinking about new approaches to teaching. First, be strategic, pick on something which will get the interest or better the active support of the school. Second, ask yourself if it is something that will get a positive response from at least some of the pupils. Third, find your own personal angle on the innovation – there is no point in doing it otherwise. Fourth, build in some evaluation of your work. Fifth, look to collaborate with a colleague if only to compare notes. Sixth, think big but start small, recall the cyclical nature of reflective learning discussed in a previous chapter. Small steps may lead to more fundamental changes. You might compare these points with Fullan's very influential account of managing change in schools (Fullan 2001).