What counts as success? the perspective of university-based researchers on their role in a school-university partnership.

Vivienne Baumfield, Moira Hulme and Frances Payne


Abstract

One of the perennial questions of education is the relationship between educational research and educational practice and attempts to improve schools by promoting teaching as an evidence informed profession continue to provoke debate. Forms of organisation, such as school-university partnerships, that encourage working across the different communities in education are promoted as a way of creating and translating knowledge about teaching and learning. However, there is a lack of the fine-grained analysis of the contribution of university-based researchers that is needed to test assumptions and identify salient features. The paper presents an account of the perceptions of the university-based participants in a school-university partnership of what they count as success in their work.

The Schools of Ambition programme (2006-2010)¹ is a national programme which aims ‘to bring about a step change in ambition and achievement’ (SEED, 2004:12) in schools in Scotland. In the second year of the project the university-based researchers decided to develop a reflexive strand to address the need for a better understanding of the work of school-university partnerships. Until recently, questions such as impact on the university-based partners and the power relations between participants have been neglected as attention has focused on the teachers as researchers. The energy of university-based participants tends to be consumed by the demands of working in what Miller (2001) describes as a form of ‘precarious organization’, in which marginality is both a source of strength and tension, leaving little time for reflection. Achieving a better understanding of the role of the university-based partners could break the unintentional cycle of repetition identified by Carlone and Webb (2006) whereby there is seldom any disruption to the university model of support over multiple attempts at participation. The reflexive strand also demonstrates a commitment to the principle of mutuality as the university-based mentors also research their practice.

In 2007-2008, an independent researcher conducted a series of individual semi-structured interviews with everyone involved in supporting Schools of Ambition and a focus group discussion to explore emerging themes (Baumfield, Hulme and Menter, 2009). The university-based members of this Research to Support Schools of Ambition team include a mix of teacher educators and education researchers. In general, participants reported that although the experience is frustrating, characterised by ‘uncomfortable collaboration’ (Menter and Hulme, 2009), it is worthwhile. In the second year of the reflexive strand the focus has been on the university-based mentors’ experiences of success. Perceptions of university-based mentors were explored through a focus group discussion and analysis of short narrative accounts of particular instances when a mentor felt they had been successful. The focus group took place in January 2009, when the first group of schools had completed the evaluation of their progress in the activities identified in the ‘transformational plan’ required by the project, and the narratives were collected in August 2009.

What counts as success?

Analysis of the responses from the focus group confirms commitment to developing close, positive relationships with schools and teachers as a strong theme:

¹ Further details of the project can be found in the annual report http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/24169/0067162.pdf
I am someone who values working with schools and being close to schools because I think that it’s our life’s blood. (FG 2:4-5)

But the sense of frustration expressed in the first year continues and it is now extended to include teachers as well as the local government advisers. They are critical of the lack of enthusiasm in schools about the opportunity to engage in the research and evidence based evaluation that is central to the project. The university-based partners feel that the motivation for schools is to plan activities and do, ‘…all these marvellous things’ (FG 2:23). Whilst teachers are interested in assessing the impact of what they do, they prefer to use forms of measurement with which they are familiar. For the teachers, evaluation consisted of quantitative measures of participation combined with intuitive professional judgement, and they saw no need to seek advice on alternative approaches:

The school in the main is actually using the School of Ambition funding quite well but they are kind of reluctant to do this sort of evaluation. They think they are evaluating but they are not really, so it is a little bit hard, to kind of I mean you try to encourage them, but at the end of the day it seems that there is a kind of a bit of opposition within the school I work with to involving me particularly closely with the evaluation aspects. (FG 2:47-51)

This sense of exclusion recurs in descriptions of being, ‘met with silence’ (FG 2:68), ‘deathly silence’ (FG 2:491) or ‘very polite conversation’ (FG 2:492), struggling to get access to teacher researchers (FG 2:87) and perhaps most poignantly being, ‘…an uninvited guest, gate crashing the party,…’ (FG 2:597). The sense of powerlessness that is the consequence of being ignored or rebuffed in this way is particularly acute when one of the motivations for the university-based partners is to form close relationships with teachers who they see as colleagues. University-based participants recognise that this perception of having been forced into adopting a particular form of evaluation is a legacy of the misunderstandings that arose when the Scottish Government launched the project:

I think the purposes and mechanisms were misaligned, the spirit of action research just didn’t align well with the shape and space that we found ourselves in. (FG 2:515-517)

They recount particular instances where schools describe having been ‘forced to do evaluation’ (FG 2:98) or being present at a meeting when a deputy head teacher was told by an adviser representing the funders that they ‘had to do some research’ (FG 2:319-320).

In most instances schools were not resistant to evaluating what they do but it is the way in which they chose to do so that is the source of the difficulty. Even when schools have developed teachers as researchers with forms of evaluation more closely aligned to the project’s intentions, there are problems with writing up the outcomes, ‘…to actually get the stuff recorded and into some kind of coherent report seems to have been a very, very low priority in the time management for staff who are doing it’, (FG 2:31-32). ‘To some extent, meeting the objectives set by the project is an achievement for the university-based partner:

…it was really difficult to build the relationship in the school because there was a strong resistance from doing it, but I actually got that person to do some research and it has been with my support, it’s been written up…I suppose do you measure that as success, that they have come round to the idea of doing research… (FG 2:93-97)

Completion of the evaluation report is not, however, an important indicator of success for university-based participants; for them it is dialogue with teachers about the relationship between research, evidence and practice that matters:

One positive aspect for me has been working with individual teachers…trying to formulate questions that we might answer … providing them with access to things that they might read…we’ve been able to tap into resources that we otherwise wouldn’t have access to…that’s been gratifying…the discussions we’ve had around the reading and, I’ve enjoyed them…(FG 2:187-195)

As well as valuing the quality of professional dialogue with individual teachers, the university-based participants also see success in terms of the re-orientation of policy makers’ views on the nature of evidence. Mentors had, for example, been able to re-negotiate the written outcome expected from the project to
incorporate the teachers’ own accounts through the ‘telling of the story’ of the changes in schools:

…I hope that one of our small victories is that we got rid of the notion that there was a right academic type report…(FG 2: 381-382)

The university-based participants see their work in the partnership as having the potential to bring about changes in the understanding of academics, as well as policy makers and practitioners, concerning the nature of ‘rigour’ when evaluating evidence. It is here, in the belief in the potential for school-university partnerships to transform rather than simply add to what is known about teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993), that the academic model of the relationship of theory and practice is questioned:

…there’s a whole genre of research that’s been done but doesn’t quite meet the requirements of getting it into an academic journal…but has got nonetheless very high value. Often it is very much about what people are thinking and I wonder if that that's not a model we ought to be looking at rather than looking at a model of academic researching…it doesn’t necessarily fit what we would call rigour but has pretty interesting insight into things…it often provides the context…I just think maybe we ought to be asking schools to be working more in that way…(FG 2:368-380)

…we’ve been aware that we really needed to create a huge innovation, to take a look at the two (academic and professional standards of rigour), that did justice to both …we are reluctant to engage in the kind of way of thinking that teachers want to do and naturally could do better if they were supported in being rigorous in their own terms. (FG 2:349-354)

The university-based mentors were committed to building relationships with colleagues in schools and emphasised supporting teachers in, ‘…having the authoritative voices in talking about their practice…’ (FG 2: 111) and so sustainability is another mark of success:

…how do we know whether or not we’ve been effective? I suppose it’s not until we finish working with the schools and we went back to them in six months or a year later and we think ah… (FG 2: 147-149).

If the benefits of partnership are to be sustained, teacher interest must be secured and this will only happen if enquiry is firmly embedded in the everyday practice of schools. Mentors refer to instances where such connections have been made through associating activity with developments such as the qualification for Chartered Teacher status (FG 2:54-55). As the first group of schools completed their projects, there were signs that the idea that partnership with the university was beneficial had taken hold and was becoming part of the way some schools work:

I’ve been invited back to one of my schools a couple of times now to talk about other projects that they want to do…an individual practitioner is about to engage in a piece of action research in an arts curriculum context and is really keen to do it so it’s not that it hasn’t had impact, had effect. (FG 2:150-155).

Application of what has been learned through involvement in the Schools of Ambition project to other issues is another encouraging sign cited by mentors. However, teacher inquiry is still seen as being ‘fragile’ (FG 2: 80-81). It is in the context of transferring learning to meet new challenges facing schools that the slowness in forging a common cause with the government advisers in the project is felt most acutely. The potential for school-university partnerships to support initiatives such as the curriculum reform ‘A Curriculum for Excellence’ (Hulme et al 2009) is dissipated as policy makers fail to make the necessary connections to the work of Schools of Ambition:

…looking at CfE (Curriculum for Excellence) and the curriculum development these schools were doing, to have that so detached from an inquiry stance just seems so incredibly frustrating, that all of this work all that has taken place and yet there is still lagging so far behind and how could we helpfully, productively, build a relationship that would work with our Senior Advisors that would help get people to understand what we are trying to achieve and so it has been incredibly frustrating …(FG 2: 126-130)
The narrative accounts of instances of success affirm the importance of establishing dialogue that promotes the conditions for practical inter-subjectivity. University-based participants write about working with teacher researchers who actively involve them in a project, in some cases even after the end of their funding through Schools of Ambition. The sense of collaboration, as opposed to coercion, is conveyed in terms of the mutual enjoyment of working together and the growing confidence of teachers in taking the initiative. The enthusiasm of teachers to develop the capacity of the school for self-evaluation is mentioned through examples such as the setting up of teacher research groups involving staff who had not been part of the funded project. In particular, two accounts refer to the ‘conversion’ of senior managers to the employment of a broader range of approaches to the evaluation of impact.

Progress with colleagues from the policy community is also recorded in the narratives. An Annual Conference has been established as a means of presenting the work of Research to Support Schools of Ambition and the attendance of delegates from the Scottish Government has raised the profile of teacher enquiry amongst policy makers. There is evidence of the sharing of approaches and the application of ideas in new contexts; for example, a university-based researcher recounts witnessing a policy maker drawing a diagram of a cycle of enquiry used in the project when discussing a new initiative with colleagues as an indicator of success.

Conclusion

The focus group transcript and the narrative accounts suggest that the elation felt by the university-based participants is a reflection of the effort required to bring about change. Whether the examples given are of work with teachers or with policymakers, they portray a slow, incremental building of trust until a ‘tipping point’ is reached. In essence, success for the university-based partners is about developing collaborations that can achieve change in schools. The complexity of relationships and tensions that arise from working across professional boundaries within an externally funded project are evident but there is also a determination to build partnerships with teachers:

…always tried to find something constructive that we can take forward and build on and if we wait for the individual committed teacher who wishes to undertake a master’s degree on a one to one person basis then we’re not going to be very busy. All of the investment and all of the great change that schools will be undergoing in the next few years, what is the role of the universities? - supporting and building an enquiry stance to that which is departmental or institutional or involves groups of teachers. Because otherwise we fall back and wait for them to come to us and that can’t be right either.

Research into school-university partnerships emphasises the dependence of long-term viability on establishing mutual benefits, reciprocity and a coalition of interest (Baumfield, 2001; McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins, 2004). For university-based participants in Research to Support Schools of Ambition these conditions are being met some of the time with some of the partners. Success may be partial and hard won but given the complexity of the partnership and its context within a government initiative during a time of political change in Scotland it is not insignificant. The experiences of the participants lend some support to the argument that a funded project framework need not be as detrimental to partnership as Miles (1978) suggests. It can provide a context for the negotiation of relationships in order to meet externally imposed conditions in which shared obligation creates a bond and the need to solve problems together (Baumfield and Butterworth, 2007). However, partnerships across institutional boundaries require participants to pay close attention to sharing intentions and negotiating ways of working together. The ‘tower of Babel’ effect experienced when people from professional communities with different ‘languages’ of practice try to work together can be reduced over time.

University-based participants’ accounts of success suggest a preference for the role of co-enquirer with their partners and this moves the debate concerning partnership away from its dependence on the transitional metaphors of ‘boundary crossing’ towards the development of networks of ‘complementary expertise’ as suggested by Whitehead (2007). Teacher educators could be significant in this development of complementary expertise as it was those university-based participants who identified closely with this who valued opportunities to build on existing links with schools. With their unique position in university faculties of education, teacher educators are well placed to ‘work the dialectic’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993) and transform the relationship between research and practice. Despite this potential a note of caution is necessary, as transformation will only be secured if the task of taking what is learned in
partnership into the heart of the academic community is accomplished. The marginality of teacher educators too often results in their voice not being heard within their own institution.

References

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 26 January 2010