



FEATURE

Research to support Schools of Ambition

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Research to support Schools of Ambition

Moira Hulme and Ian Menter outline an ambitious programme and its supporting research

Introduction

This briefing paper offers an outline of *Research to Support Schools of Ambition*, a school-university collaborative partnership initiated by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) in September 2006. It sketches the development of this three-year project, from the policy background to the support strategy that is being developed. It identifies the major challenges that have arisen in the first year of the programme and some of the issues currently under consideration as we approach the second cycle of research and a significant expansion in the number of participating schools. Although the research element of the Schools of Ambition is still developing, what seems to be emerging is an innovative way of providing support for schools that are going through a period of significant change. Although the schools vary enormously in many ways, they have all committed to significant change and as they engage with a research orientation to that change, we are beginning to see the establishment of new processes of knowledge exchange and new relationships between research, policy and practice.

The Schools of Ambition programme

Ambitious, Excellent Schools (SEED, 2004) set out a modernisation agenda for comprehensive schools in Scotland. This was followed in February 2005 by an invitation to local authorities to nominate secondary schools to participate in the 'Schools of Ambition' programme. The stated aim of the programme is that Schools of Ambition will 'stand out in their locality, and nationally, as innovators and leaders, providing ambition and opportunity for young people, setting an example to the whole community' (SEED, 2007, p.1). There are currently 52 Schools of Ambition distributed across the 32 local authorities of Scotland. There are two routes to becoming a School of Ambition: (1) 'automatic access onto the programme for schools receiving intensive post-inspection support for improvement from HMIE (Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education); (2) nomination by local authorities of schools most likely to benefit from the programme' (SEED, 2004, p. 12). According to SEED, the current cohort of Schools of Ambition includes 'schools most in need of transformation - very often those contending with the most challenging local circumstances in Scotland

- and schools that have strong ideas for transformation and can set new standards of excellence' (SEED, 2007, p.1).

Each school is receiving additional funding (£100,000 per annum) over a three-year period to implement proposals contained within a locally negotiated 'transformational plan'. The schools are charged with identifying local priorities for 'transformational change', setting challenging targets for improvement and outlining appropriate strategies to achieve these goals. In contrast to 'outside-in' forms of evaluation, the Schools of Ambition hold responsibility for collecting and analysing evaluation information that will map 'distance travelled'. Teacher-evaluators in each school have taken responsibility for discrete evaluation strands and are collecting and analysing information to map progress toward the achievement of locally-defined goals. A commitment to self-evaluation and compliance with monitoring and review procedures is a condition of the award. Each school is supported by a designated Higher Education Institution (HEI) based 'mentor' (or 'supporter') and an Advisor from the Schools of Ambition Support Team within SEED¹. In the second year of the programme, additional targeted support will be provided in some cases by HMIE.

School-university partnership: Supporting the Schools of Ambition

Following a competitive tendering process, SEED commissioned a team of researchers from the Universities of Glasgow, Aberdeen and Strathclyde to provide research and evaluation support through a combination of face-to-face, tele- and e-mentoring (using a virtual research and collaboration environment, VRE²). The Research Support Team is developing a model of collaborative research in which a core team of mentors³ supports the development of action enquiry across the expanding Schools of Ambition network. From September 2006 university-based mentors have worked with the first tranche of 21 schools, joined by a second tranche of 7 schools in March 2007. A third tranche of 24 schools will join the programme of support in the autumn term, 2007. The role of the Research Support Team is to stream formative feedback to the schools throughout the 'transformation period'. The mentoring strategy is demand-led, responding to the range of foci expressed in each school's

transformational plan. Mentors have adopted a flexible and responsive approach in meeting the diverse and changing needs of the range of schools participating in the programme. The pattern of engagement has differed across the schools. Some schools have chosen to host research skills workshops organised by the research mentor for groups of teachers; others elected to have a series of one-to-one meetings with the teacher evaluators/project managers and the university-based mentor. The following support is available to schools through the mentoring programme:

- Support in refining teacher-initiated proposals
- Advice on issues of manageability/scope, stages, timeline and resources
- Advice on ethical practice in practitioner research
- Advice on collaborative use of the VRE
- Advice on accessing electronic resources (research digest databases)
- Support for critical analysis of literature
- Support for data collection and analysis
- Support for self-monitoring and evaluation
- Support for dissemination of work in progress and writing enquiry summaries.

One of the key challenges of the *Research to Support Schools of Ambition* has been the provision of support that is tailored to the specific needs of each participating school and the requirement to offer a robust framework of support across the cohort. The schools have very different needs and embarked on the programme in different states of readiness to engage in systematic forms of self-evaluation. The mentoring team operates within a limited resource of three days' face-to-face support for each school. Building relationships between partners and negotiating an agreed plan of action that started from each school's priorities was essential in the initial stages of the programme and continues to be of central importance.

'Distance travelled'

In addition to providing feedback to the participating schools to aid reflection, the Research Support Team is gathering information on the processes of change implementation and adoption across the Schools of Ambition. Between October 2006 and January 2007, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 members of the leadership group with overall responsibility for the School of Ambition in the first twenty-one schools. On average these audio recorded interviews were of fifty minutes duration. A second round of interviews was conducted in June 2007 with 34 teacher researchers who are leading evaluation

strands within the schools. In addition, an electronic questionnaire was distributed to all participants (n=62) in the programme – school leaders, project managers and teacher researchers - between June and August 2007. An evaluation conference was held in May 2007, attended by staff from all 21 schools and a total of 24 papers were presented, the majority of them by teachers in the schools.

The Schools of Ambition are keen to exercise new freedoms to adapt the curriculum to the local needs of pupils. Priorities for change include the need for curriculum breadth, particularly the expansion of opportunities for more 'relevant' vocational learning that might tackle problems of disaffection and disengagement and address local skills shortages. In raising expectations and aspirations the schools are experimenting with pedagogical approaches that encourage higher levels of creativity, critical enquiry and co-operative learning. In working towards these aspirations, school leaders have identified the need to build school cultures that are open to change: sharing the rationale for innovation, providing opportunities for participation across departmental boundaries, and developing the capacity of teachers to initiate change and self-evaluate. The notion of devolved leadership features strongly in many school transformational plans and external consultants have been engaged to support this development e.g. Columba 1400, Brathay Consultancy, the Forum Consultancy and Sheppard Moscow. The scale of the proposed changes, often involving a number of strands at a number of levels, presents significant strategic and operational challenges.

School of Ambition funding has been used to create specific appointments to coordinate developments, for example, the creation of a new Depute or Business Manager post or Project Coordinator and Project Assistant roles. At an organisational level, a number of schools have established new internal structures and practices to promote the changes identified in the Transformational Plan. These include the creation or revision of working groups. Consultation and participation have been promoted through a variety of means including the authoring and distribution of seminar papers, supported by in-house seminar programmes for teachers; the development of staff development programmes, including the provision of regular elective workshops led by peers; peer mentoring (including peer observation); and the use of designated in-service days. Some schools have identified lead departments to champion the programme for change across the wider school community. It will be interesting to see how the different approaches to managing change develop within schools, between schools and beyond school.

In reviewing progress across the first year, participating teachers identified several *inhibiting* factors:

- Uncertainty over the final budget allocation for each School of Ambition
- Lack of development time for teachers (to meet, talk, plan and reflect)
- 'Initiative overload' of a core group of change leaders
- Multiple responsibilities which pull against a commitment to greater collegial planning
- Need for flexibility in timetabling to create opportunities for peer observation and co-teaching
- Challenges of accommodating flexible vocational programmes within the constraints of the school day.

Several factors were identified as *enabling* progress:

- Opportunities for curriculum flexibility and re-structuring
- 'Licence' and encouragement 'to be different' (from SEED Advisors and LA Quality Improvement Officers)
- Greater access to key contacts and opportunities for networking
- Status and additional funding from the award of School of Ambition.

Building professional learning communities

Several schools described the development of new relationships, responsibilities and skills required to carry forward aspects of innovation. In working towards 'transformation' the Schools of Ambition have made a public commitment to 'becoming different', making a significant and sustainable change. The transformation process is often described using spatial metaphors, for example the notion of 'distance travelled' employed by SEED. In reflecting on the challenges encountered by the first 21 Schools of Ambition, it is perhaps useful to also think of distance in terms of proximity (to) as well as distance (from). Self-evaluation involves increasingly devolved ways of working and this entails an 'enfolding' or reduction of distance between stakeholders/partners. Many of the schools are moving towards forms of self-evaluation that involve a wider range of voices. There remain very different levels of engagement ranging from consultation conducted at a safe distance (through postal, telephone and e-questionnaires), through to the formation of representative parent panels/forums, pupil focus groups and (planned) pupil enquiry groups. Approaches range from those that are invitational and participatory in intent to those that remain grounded more firmly in audit

than enquiry. Encouraging dialogue through the promotion of closer relationships ('nearness' rather than distance) has presented challenges to hierarchical relations and traditional demarcations between senior management, classroom teachers, other professionals in school, pupils, parents and other external partners in the local community. There is an acknowledgement in some accounts that 'transformation' will entail moving towards more inclusive and participatory approaches in terms of needs analysis, programme planning and 'delivery', reflection and cyclical review.

Conclusion

The Teachers' Agreement of 2001 ('McCrone') (Scottish Executive, 2001) sought to move teacher culture in Scotland from hierarchy and compliance towards collegiality and professional autonomy. The early experiences of the Schools of Ambition raise some interesting tensions within that project. Principal among these is the familiar ambiguity within frameworks of public accountability that have the potential to be both regulatory and/or developmental (Mahony and Hextall, 2000). As responsibility for evaluation is devolved to the schools, it will be interesting to see to what extent responsibility is devolved *within* school (and beyond schools) and in particular how approaches to institutional self-evaluation connect with forms of self-responsibility articulated in notions of 'extended professionalism'. One of the challenges for the Research Support Team in the second cycle of the programme will be to provide opportunities for networking and wider recognition of the work of the teacher researchers within the Schools of Ambition - for example, through the Scottish Educational Research Association Emerging Researchers' Network, the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTC) teacher researcher programme and GTC Professional Recognition framework, as well as Chartered Teacher and Scottish Qualification for Headship programmes.

Footnotes

[1] The SEED Senior Advisors for Schools of Ambition are Linda Rae, Lynne Sinclair and Sandra Bogan. The SEED Project Coordinator is Deirdre Kelly.

[2] The Schools of Ambition VRE, created within the Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) VRE, is managed by Sanna Rimpilainen and Donald Christie at Strathclyde University.

[3] The mentoring team includes: Kevin Lowden, Dely Elliot, John Hall and Stuart Hall (the SCRE Centre, University of Glasgow); Fran Payne, Philip Woods, Norman Coutts and Dean Robson

(University of Aberdeen); Beth Dickson and Moira Hulme (University of Glasgow). The team is also supported by two external 'critical friends', Anne Campbell of Leeds Metropolitan University and John Cowan, formerly at Napier University, Edinburgh.

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