Enabling an inquiry culture and leadership development

Project focus
We set out to create inquiry leaders and an inquiry hub across the school, researching and developing practice around raising the attainment of the more able in the first instance (one of our school priority areas). The staff taking on the role of inquiry leaders were senior leaders or had teaching and learning responsibility. The idea was that they would act as positive role models to other staff by actively seeking innovative and effective practice to share with colleagues and bring about changes in classroom practice.

What we did
Professor Qing Gu met with the leaders on a one-to-one basis. She offered them relevant research, including example case studies, and supported them in developing appropriate data collection tools that would enable them to monitor impact.

The areas the leaders decided to explore were:
- the kinds of classroom activities that are more likely to engage more able pupils
- how we can support parents in becoming more involved in their children’s learning at home
- how we can use iPads to support learning

As the project developed, our more able pupils became involved in inquiry work too.

Critical moments in our journey
- Making it clear to the leadership team that the project was linked to school priorities secured their commitment from the start
- Having the data collection tools and reading the case studies provided by the University was important for capturing people’s interest and showing what was involved in being an inquiry leader
- Involving pupils as inquiry leaders increased everyone’s familiarity with the terms and what inquiry involves
- Having ‘inquiry work’ as a regular agenda item to enable staff to feed back where they were and share ideas for next steps, kept the profile up
- Being able to explore our ideas with a university partner moved our thinking forwards

To my surprise, the leaders reacted positively to the project; they were motivated by the idea of engaging with the university and the opportunity to work with academics.

I felt that it was essential that the leaders understood that this was not a ‘bolt on’ activity, but very much linked to our school priorities and to our continuing school development

What has changed

Commitment to self-improvement
As a Teaching School, we had become used to supporting other schools in improving their practice. But now, rather than just give support, we’ve been able to receive support too. Reading research and carrying out our own inquiries has provided us with further opportunities to source best practice, both from within our school and beyond. Working with the university has enabled us to look at published research and carry out our own, then learn from it so we can take our practice forward.

Commitment to research and development
The idea of research and development is now part of our school culture and will stay part of our culture. Our senior team is now reading research papers which they would not have engaged with before. They are taking the time to think about their actions and involve pupil voice. We expect that class teachers will start to become involved with inquiry projects next academic year. They can see how inquiry is both useful and fun to do.

New academic knowledge gained
The leaders have really grasped the idea of gathering evidence and using what they find to reflect on and develop their classroom practice. Even the children are familiar with the ‘inquiry leader’ title. They know that if we’ve got a problem to solve or a question that we would like to answer, that they need to go out and gather ideas.

University partnership roles
The academics have challenged our thinking through questioning and dialogue linked to research and evidence-based approaches. Our university partner also supported us in adopting a focused and systematic approach, including collecting baseline and follow up data, and designing questionnaires designed to capture pupils’ views and the early impact of the project on the culture of the school. The leaders welcomed the opportunity to read around the subject using the case studies and readings suggested by the academics. As time is really scarce in school, having the academic support around the knowledge of case studies of other teachers’ experiences and relevant academic research was really important.

Evidence of impact?

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