TITLE	**EVALUATION OF BIRMINGHAM LOCAL AUTHORITY'S ACTION RESEARCH STRATEGY**
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INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the School Improvement Division at Birmingham Local Authority has been developing teacher-led research as part of its continuing professional development (CPD) programme. This has included several action research projects, some undertaken alongside the University of Central England (UCE). This approach was strengthened in response to *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003) and *Primary and Early Years Strategy* (Birmingham City Council, 2004). Advisers from the Primary Teaching and Learning Team initiated discussions with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in 2004 about a project that would bring together existing teacher-led research in which they had been involved (see Wilson et al., 2003; Sharp et al., 2005). The project began in February 2005 and was completed in June 2007. It involved the following strands:

1. An independent evaluation of the Teaching and Learning Team's action research strategy, including a detailed analysis of the impacts of the action research approach on the adviser and teacher networks for which it was constructed.

2. Consultancy and support to ten schools taking part in enquiry-based activities, including methodological guidance and the provision of reading/research sources.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings presented below are based on research carried out for Strand One.

Impacts of the approach

- All teacher-participants had or were enjoying the experience of carrying out research. They had been given time to think about what they were delivering in the classroom and for what purpose it was being delivered.

- Research involvement had developed teachers' knowledge of subject areas, thus improving their teaching of these topics, and had provided them with new motivation and increased confidence. It had also enabled them to work with well-known scholars which had they had found exciting and enthusing.

- Action research was thought to have developed teachers' skills in reflective practice, critical analysis and project management. They were using new approaches and resources to assist with teaching and learning and were better able to articulate children's learning needs.

- The impact on pupils was dependent on the topic under investigation (such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT), literacy and thinking skills), but positive impacts on behaviour and attitudes were widely noted.

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- Research involvement was having a school-wide impact. One headteacher said research into assessment for learning had brought her school together. Another noted that teamwork among colleagues had improved and literacy planning throughout the school was more coherent. Another thought research activity had brought a 'dynamic feel to what happens in the school'.

Contribution to CPD

- On the basis of the evidence collected, the Teaching and Learning Team appears to have achieved its aims of developing a CPD approach in line with *Excellence and Enjoyment* (DfES, 2003). The approach is an innovative part of its menu of CPD activities. It responds to locally identified needs, enables schools to control their own agenda and allows teachers to personalise their teaching.

- The approach was considered to be a sustainable approach to CPD by a principal and a senior adviser as it requires the long-term involvement of teachers. This is achieved by teachers selecting a research topic of importance to themselves and their school.

- The value of action research to promote CPD can be evidenced by the commitment of those involved. Advisers noted that very few teachers withdrew their involvement and several teachers continued to be involved in projects year after year.

- Some teachers were working towards further degrees and/or had gained promotions. However, their continued involvement in action research was thought to be dependent on their own level of confidence and school-level support.

- Some teachers had received a lot of support from senior managers, but others had not. One adviser described action research as 'more of a bolt on' in such cases. That said, one headteacher warned against the mandating of research-led activities as such work could become less powerful if participation was obligatory.

- Personal interest in a topic was teachers' main reason for research involvement. CPD tended to be a secondary factor. This suggests that research involvement *per se*, aside from the research topic, is not automatically viewed by teachers as a means of CPD. Yet in the long term, it is the research process which has the potential to support teachers and schools in self-evaluation.

Models of good practice

Project set-up
- It is important for teachers to become familiar with the process of action research at an early stage, and for advisers to understand the context of each school in order to facilitate more purposeful discussions about how action research might improve teaching and learning.

- For research projects to be successful, they should respond to situations schools are confronting. The focus and aims of research projects should be conveyed to and understood by all school staff.

- Engaging with previous research before embarking on a research project can help teachers to formulate research questions. Positioning one's work in the context of existing literature also increases its robustness. Some teachers, however, are unsure how to access and search for research literature.

- It can be beneficial for research to be project managed by a small team. However, for research to be a major school focus, it is crucial that others be kept informed of project developments.

- Senior management support, interest and involvement were viewed as crucial to the success of a research project. It was particularly necessary for headteachers to be supportive, interested and involved. The importance of governor and parental support was also mentioned by interviewees.

Research process
- Case-study teachers advised others to choose uncomplicated research projects that can be carried out in class time and have practical end results.

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- Academic support was seen as important by interviewees, especially in the initial stages of research. In particular, assistance was needed in how to review existing research evidence, how to select appropriate methodology, how to analyse findings and how to write up results.

- The ethical implications of research projects were not taken into account by all teachers. The concepts of consent, confidentiality and risk need to be considered when carrying out research.

- Resources needed to document research evidence, such as recording equipment, were not available in all schools. Schools may find a resource bank of equipment useful.

- Support from advisers was viewed positively. Their involvement had helped teachers to formulate ideas and plan projects. Receiving constructive feedback on how to develop project work and assistance with problems was also greatly valued. Advisers thought it necessary to meet regularly with teachers in order to provide support and reflect on progress.

Potential barriers
- Case-study schools used a cascade model (that is, one or two teachers led research and disseminated to others). This seemed to work well. However, this approach can individualise the research process and lessen the whole-school impact of a research project.

- In cases where funding for research is provided, it is necessary for schools to ensure that measures are in place to sustain the work beyond the initial funding period if necessary. Research involvement should be recognised as an on-going activity.

- Accreditation for teachers' involvement in research can be a motivating force, but if not optional could be perceived by some as an additional burden.

- If schools were to be accredited for involvement in research, the system should avoid bureaucracy. However, making research involvement mandatory could demotivate staff and lessen its impact.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The action research approach adopted by the Teaching and Learning Team has grown and developed dramatically since it was launched. It has become a key element of the Team's school improvement work. The NFER's evaluation drew attention to many positive outcomes, but presented a number of recommendations to be considered to further develop the strategy, as shown below.

- *Enhancement of the work of the Network:* for example*,* a review of the role, structure and purpose of the steering group, and also consideration of closer integration of its work with Network research days and other 'showcase' events.

- *Promotion of wider participation in action research:* for example, the Team should consider how best to encourage involvement of those less likely to take part, while continuing to promote participation in the Network.

- *Dissemination and impact: ,*for example*,* the provision of a more structured approach to dissemination activities within schools, within strands across schools, between strands, and with schools (both primary and secondary) outside the Network – to strengthen the Network and increase awareness of its work.

- *Networking:* for example*,* the Team should consider how the 'Network' element of its strategy can continue to be enhanced and strengthened within and between strands, but also with the education community more widely to promote dissemination and the 'buzz' of research commented on by interviewees.

- *Practical considerations for schools:* for example, the Team should consider how best to ensure that the support, interest and involvement of headteachers continues, particularly where participants are less committed and proactive in carrying out research. Commitment to, and support for, future

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- research could be enhanced by ensuring it correlates strongly with School Development Plans and that the way in which it will contribute to school self-evaluation is made explicit.

- *Monitoring and evaluation:* for example, the Team should continue to develop a robust and rigorous strategy for monitoring and evaluating both the research process itself and the individual projects and strands. This strategy should establish processes to allow longer-term impacts to be evaluated.

- *Accreditation and links with UCE Birmingham:* for example, the Team should continue to explore ways of introducing greater flexibility into the accreditation process and ways to strengthen links between teachers participating in action research (particularly those choosing not to seek accreditation) and UCE Birmingham.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Strand One of the research project comprised interviews with: 11 teachers, six headteachers and one deputy headteacher from nine different schools, seven local authority advisers (including a principal and senior adviser) and an academic from the University of Central England. The findings of an in-house questionnaire completed by 61 teachers on behalf of the Teaching and Learning Team were also considered by the NFER team in relation to their evaluation.

PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION

The full report is currently unpublished.

REFERENCES

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