Moving from the local to the global in theorising curriculum leadership within an Action Research approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on a way of taking insights gained from investigations and actions at local sites to wider scrutiny and use in such areas as systemic policy and global comparisons.

The methodological approach taken in our work on curriculum leadership has been largely within an Action Research framework characterised as critical, collaborative and reconstructive. Much of our data has emerged from the use of lifeworld perspectives of teachers, parents and students (elicited as narratives and elaborated in a series of ongoing conversations and actions).

Action Research, however, is largely a local process. It is also an iterative process, and in our more recent work, we have begun experimenting with the use of what we call a hermeneutic spiral. Our definition of such a spiral invites critical friends both within local sites and wider contexts to critique and reconstruct our interpretations of data and actions. We contend that such an approach has the potential to incorporate local insights into broader unified alliances which, in turn, have the potential to transform local (and largely generative) data into more generalisable and universally useable data.

The reflective nature of the paper, then, lends itself to the identification of a research approach which blends the local and the global. Such an approach is not without its issues and ongoing challenges. The paper concludes with a proposed research approach along with a consideration of some of the issues and challenges.

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the issue of how localised, largely qualitative data move beyond description to authentic levels of analysis and interpretation as a basis for making an impact in the more global arenas of policy formulation and implementation within education systems. A hermeneutic spiral of critical friend networks as a series of opportunities for ongoing analysis, interpretation and implication is presented as a way of enlarging the sphere of influence of such data in these more global arenas. The core issue of the paper relates to matters of quality, authenticity/evidentiary warrant, ethics and responsibility, and as such, the paper relates to the main theme and the sub-themes posted for this conference. This paper, then, is a means of sharing reflections on our work with others who confront this or a similar issue in their research activities.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical framework

The issue is discussed within the context of work which we have been doing in the area of curriculum leadership for effective learning and teaching, using a variety of strategies within an action research approach which has sought to be both critical and collaborative (Aspland, Macpherson, Proudord & Whitmore, 1996). This work has celebrated the centrality of teachers in curriculum leadership; and more recently it has focussed on the inclusion of other significant stakeholders (namely parents and students) in curriculum leadership (See Macpherson, Aspland, Brooker & Elliott, 1999; Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Elliott, 1999).

Curriculum leadership is viewed as any initiative that teachers in the multi-faceted contexts of teaching/learning sites may undertake to encourage more effective learning and teaching. It is about leading learning and seizing opportunities that appear to have the potential to enhance learning and teaching experiences and outcomes. (Macpherson, 1998). Such a view derives from a theorised position about curriculum which celebrates the centrality of teachers in curriculum decision-making and their role as curriculum decision-makers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Brubaker, 1994; Henderson and Hawthorne, 1995; Macpherson, Elliott & Aspland, 1995; Moller & Katzenmeyer, 1996).

Our current work is focussing on the place and readiness of significant stakeholders to engage in curriculum leadership, using the lifeworld perspectives (Habermas, 1987) of teachers, parents and students as data. These data are being used to elicit implications for supporting and sustaining the engagement of these stakeholders in curriculum leadership actions (Darling Hammond, 1998). Such data, then, become the basis for theorising notions of place and readiness within the context of contemporary curriculum practice. This work is reported in another paper at this confrence.

What is significant in our position about curriculum leadership is that while there may be broad factors which operate to shape it, the actual shape at particular sites is distinctive if not unique. It is important, therefore, to work from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in in understanding curriculum leadership and how it might most appropriately be supported and sustained. The local descriptions and interpretations of curriculum leadership are crucial. How these might combine into some sort of platform for politicising the issues in wider arenas becomes the challenge for modes of inquiry and ongoing action?

Methodological framework

A considerable amount of our energy in this work has centred around the use of narratives and conversations in generating case study accounts of curriculum leadership as perceived by teachers, parents and students at a small number of individual teaching/learning sites. While these accounts are largely descriptive, they have been and are being used as a basis for generating propositions about meanings/interpretations and implications for both policy and practice. Within an action research framework, the accounts have been generative of propositions emerging from a critical perspective which values opportunities for stakeholders to critique "what is" as a basis for considering and acting upon "what could be" in terms of optimising learning opportunities and outcomes for all learners and of creating and discovering space for the voices of significant stakeholders in curriculum leadership (See the Macpherson et al 1999 references above).

The difficulty arises, however, when an attempt is made to move from the local to the global with these descriptive data from which, at best, tentative ideas have been generated. The obvious reaction is to take a positivist way of thinking and to use such data to develop a survey instrument for distribution to and completion by a much wider (and supposedly a more representative) sample of the relevant population. Such a reaction is not new; and there are countless examples of using a mixed methodology (for example, Brewer & Hunter, 1992; Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989) in an attempt to confirm case study data (or indeed, to use a case study approach to amplify survey findings). Indeed, we have used such an approach in some of our recent work (Elliott, Brooker, Macpherson, McInman & Thurlow, 1997). Another reaction, deemed to be post-positivist has been to use a grounded theory approach (for example, Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998; Richards & Richards, 1998) where we have seen the development of software packages to manage unstructured qualitative data.

This paper does not argue that such reactions are inappropriate. Rather, the paper is the articulation of a reflective search within the context of our own work for a way of analysing, interpreting, theorising and authenticating localised and largely qualitative case study data which does not resort to positivist and quasi-quantitative approaches and strategies. If data are generated through narratives and conversations (Aspland, Macpherson, Brooker & Elliott, 1998), then these data, we maintain, may also be analysed and interpreted from broader critical perspectives via the ongoing use of narratives and conversations (See also Denzin and Lincoln, 1998).

Action Research has always been an iterative process and has been characterised often as a spiral of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis, 1994). Our work, using action research, has emphasised the critical and the collaborative aspects - critical in the sense of having theorised positions about curriculum leadership for effective learning and teaching and about teachers' (and other significant stakeholders') place and readiness to engage in curriculum leadership; and collaborative (in that we have worked with teachers and not on teachers) in collecting, analysing and interpreting data contained in initial narratives and transcripts and in summaries of ongoing conversations (Aspland, Macpherson, Proudford & Whitmore, 1996; Aspland, Macpherson, Brooker & Elliott, 1998; Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Elliott, 1998).

This paper, then, seeks to elaborate on that iterative process of theorising, by articulating a place for critical friend networks which seek to take the narratives and the conversations about the narratives (which are about analysing, interpreting and theorising the data) beyond the local to the global. A significant part of this elaboration is to define critical friend networks (Chapman, 1996); and to establish principles and protocols for inviting colleagues to be

members of these networks and for facilitating and maintaining the networks as a hermeneutic spiral.

Critical friend networks as a hermeneutic spiral (taken from the notion of a hermeneutic circle, as outlined by Gallagher, 1992) intertwining with an action research spiral may be considered broadly in stages.

- Firstly, university researchers may use colleagues in higher education, locally, nationally and internationally to refine critical frameworks which surround initial and emerging ideas for ongoing research; secondly, colleagues at the levels of policy and systemic leadership to define the potential relevance of initial and emerging ideas for ongoing research; and thirdly, colleagues at the levels of school and classroom practice to define the potential applicability of such ideas for empowering practitioners to critique and reconstruct themselves, their professional work and their work contexts. Critical friends (and the alliances which they may form) who emerge at this stage, it is argued, have the potential to continue as a way of scrutinising localised descriptive data; of analysing and interpreting it critically and collaboratively; and of taking it forward as critically-informed and collaborative thinking (and action).
- Such networks could then move into successive stages (Carspeckan, 1996) in tandem with the notion of an action research spiral; and they could be the vehicle through which a living educational theory (Whitehead, 1989) emerges and impacts upon both policy and practice at local and more global levels. The merging of the two spirals helps to emphasise the importance of theorising by practitioners, academics and policy makers in collaboration and to narrow the gap often perceived as a bifurcation of the irrelevance of theory to practice on the one hand and of the atheoretical nature of practice on the other (Smith, 1987). Such merging also has the potential to provide the space for the distinctive voices to be heard.

The networks, then, provide a means whereby research participants can step outside their research in order to critique and reconstruct their research processes and outcomes in collaboration with significant others (Davidson Wasser & Bresler, 1996; Newman & MacDonald, 1993; Rossman, 1993,) in an ongoing or iterative manner. The networks, in fact, become an iterative and cumulative vehicle for establishing and maintaining meta narratives and conversations about the research and its implications in the more global arenas of policy formulation and implementation within education systems. The inclusion of critical friends at the levels of higher education; policy and systems; and schools and classrooms (which could well include parents and students) has the potential to harness the distinctive perspectives represented in educational communities into an exciting praxis of analytical investigation, critical interpretation and reconstructive action. The confluence of these various levels of critical friend networks as a hermeneutic spiral seeks to value the subjective ways in which stakeholders see and interpret their lifeworld and to incorporate these perspectives in both descriptive and critically interpretive terms at the stages of analysis and application. A hermeneutic spiral as a meta conversation does not ignore or try to simplify the messy complexities of such subjectivities. Rather, it welcomes such complexities as representing a more authentic and thicker picture of lived reality; and as a basis for pursuing an iterative conversation in the search for appropriate actions in the short-term and for new challenges in the long-term in both local and broader global arenas.

DISCUSSION

This paper is a search for ideas and is based on reflections on our work in a large research project (funded by the Australian Research Council) (Aspland, Macpherson, Brooker & Elliott, 1998; Brooker & Macpherson, 1998; Macpherson & Brooker, 1998, 1998a); on

subsequent exploratory work in four cultural contexts (concerning the creation and discovery of space for the voices of significant stakeholders in curriculum leadership) (Macpherson, 1998); on the process used to develop a paper for the 1999 AERA Annual Meeting (Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland & Elliott, 1999); and on the research approach and strategies used in a recent small-scale pilot research study focussing on an investigation of places and spaces for teachers, parents and student in curriculum decision-making/curriculum leadership (this study has as yet not been reported)

The search for ways of making qualitative data and their analyses more significant in shaping policy and its implementation in education systems is appropriate for researchers who work within frameworks which are informed by critical perspectives and oriented towards collaborative and transformative practice. The areas of analysis and interpretation are somewhat of a "black box". This paper is an attempt to open the lid of that box and to explore whether critical friend networks as a hermeneutic spiral might be one way of facing the challenges inherent in the paper's title and purpose.

The paper explores one way of thinking about and acting upon the issue of making localised qualitative data available to interpretation and application in more global arenas. Such an approach values the subjective nature of our work and the ways in which collaborative efforts (involving a range of critical friend networks as outlined above) have the potential to harness the "checks and balances" within iterative conversations to take localised data authentically into broader arenas. In such exploration, the paper is concerned with such matters as standards of quality, authenticity/evidentiary warrant, ethics and responsibility.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Here, we offer a set of questions to frame discussion at the paper session and to prompt an ongoing conversation after the conference.

The questions are as follows:

> *Can a hermeneutic spiral of critical friend networks as a series of opportunities for ongoing analysis, interpretation and implication be a way of enlarging the sphere of influence of such data in these more global arenas.*
>
> *How important is it to work from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in in understanding curriculum leadership and how it might most appropriately be supported and sustained?*
>
> *As local descriptions and interpretations of curriculum leadership are crucial, how might we combine them into some sort of platform for politicising the issues in wider arenas becomes the challenge for modes of inquiry and ongoing action?*
>
> *Is Action Research an appropriate framework within which to develop these iterative spirals as a basis for taking the local to the global?*
>
> *What sorts of issues lie within the "black box" in such areas as quality, authenticity, ethics and responsibility?*

Does the collaborative nature of our work have the potential to harness the "checks and balances" within iterative conversations to take localised data authentically into broader arenas?

It is the conversation emerging from these questions which will take us to the next stage of our reflective journey.

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