

Reimagining leadership in pedagogy and research: Recasting roles to improve student engagement

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In 2019, six independent primary schools volunteered to participate in an innovative process that urged them to listen to multiple perspectives, with the desire to improve student engagement in learning. This paper focuses on the perspectives of teachers, schools, and researchers who embarked on this journey of reimagining pedagogical practice and leadership. The schools involved were performing well according to standardised measures, yet teachers spoke of compliant students who participated without agency. The schools entered this journey only knowing that change was needed, but not what or how. As researchers we were asked to describe each schools' journey. Like the staff, we had no control over the events and while we had some research questions, we started with no tools and were required to be open to the design thinking process. We were there to surrender to the same sense of vulnerability as participants, and simply stand back, watch and record their triumphs and struggles.

The process of change was facilitated by a UK Innovation Team who presented three workshops and coached staff across the year. As the observers, our research design grew as we came to use qualitative tools of interviews with staff and leaders, participant observations of the workshop days as well as document analysis of the staff and school's data collection and planning during the year. Various design thinking tools were used by staff to uncover perspectives that led to dramatic changes in pedagogical practices. New voices in the schools were invited to describe how the process of learning engaged them, urging schools to reassess their processes and move forward into a new reality that was informed by diverse perspectives. We found that leadership at multiple levels was critical, as a need for vulnerability was realized. The permission to "have a go" and maybe get it wrong was key to success, not just only for schools but also the researchers. During this process, roles became unraveled and the way forward, reimagined. Participants, and at times researchers, relinquished their control and exercised a cautious agility as they nimbly forged a new path into the unknown. This paper recalls the events of change through participant and researcher perspectives. These change processes, tainted with fragility, were necessary in enabling roles to be reexamined and redefined.