Walking the talk: authentic teaching for social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL)

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of an action research project that enabled teachers to teach social and emotional learning authentically and to develop their own curricula rather than relying on provided resources. The process that this paper identifies is an authentic, modelled, experiential approach to teacher education that can be applied to teaching and learning in all schools, subjects and countries although the context described here is UK schools.

Keywords

Social; emotional; experiential; modeling; authentic; learning

Background to Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

1988 saw the introduction of the National Curriculum (DfES, 1988) that defined the knowledge, skills and understanding needed at each stage of learning more tightly than before. This was followed by the establishment of National Strategies[1] – a department that created strategies describing how key subjects should be taught. The predetermined curriculum and pedagogy were seen as 'prescriptive' (BBC, 2009) and focused on knowledge and skills (Hallam, 1998). As the efforts to raise standards grew, the now DCSF (Department of Children and Family Services) explored growing evidence that social and emotional skills underpinned effective learning. In 2008 teachers were presented with a new curriculum area in the UK – Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL).

The effectiveness of social and emotional development in raising school achievement was first evaluated by the National Strategies in a Behaviour and Attendance Pilot in 2003 (Hallam, Rhamie and Shaw, 2006). The SEBS (Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills) pilot[2] was then developed by the National Strategies into the full and whole school Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)[3] in 2007. Reported benefits of the SEAL approach include: improved behaviour, attendance and attainment, and ways to resolve school improvement, staff development, leadership and family and community relations issues (Banerjee for the National Strategies, 2010:3-5). However, there are critics of the approach, as shown by Craig's (2007:3) comments that '*In short, we fear SEAL is encouraging a large-scale psychological experiment on young people, which will not just waste time and resources but could actually back-fire and unwittingly undermine people's well-being in the longer-term'.* In 2007 Craig, who wrote for the Centre for Confidence (a charitable organisation whose focus is the development of confidence and well-being[4]) was a lone voice of critique in the

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[1] http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/
[2] http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/65978?uc=force_uj
[3] http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/inclusion/behaviourattendanceandseal
[4] http://www.centreforconfidence.co.uk/

face of compelling evidence that social and emotional well-being were critical to success in schools, consequently the Government continued its focus on SEAL.

The SEAL initiative was launched in primary and secondary schools in 2007 as a non statutory element of the curriculum. Its importance was highlighted by the Every Child Matters Outcomes that via the 2004 Children Act (DCSF, 2004) legally binds all services working with children to ensure that they; stay safe, enjoy and achieve, be healthy, make a positive contribution, and have economic well-being. SEAL was a mechanism that allowed schools to evidence that they were meeting several of these outcomes. In 2007 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) reinforced SEAL's importance by drawing it on the curriculum map as the underpinning set of skills that allows children to access the wider curriculum above.

The rationale for SEAL was based in the findings of three convincing studies; and Barlow's (2002) study of mental health work in schools, Weare's (2003) DfES Research Report on developing emotional literacy and an influential US review from CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) (Elias et al, 1997) that synthesised the evidence on fifty-one Social and Emotional programmes. The premise of the literature was that possessing such social and emotional skills would enable children and young people to learn more effectively, and that lack of such skills was a barrier to effective learning. This ignores the significance of environment. An emotionally literate child may well struggle to remain emotionally literate if in a classroom or school with low emotional intelligence, that is to say a school which has poor relationships and bullying. The task then was not to teach individual children, but to develop a whole school approach where teaching would be emotionally literate enabling emotionally literate learning. The National Strategies (2007) promoted this notion of a whole school approach to SEAL. However, Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) challenge the benefits of the whole school approach; '[*SEAL] simply promotes the language and practices of psychotherapy in schools, [SEAL is] based*

essentially on pop-psychology'. The boundary between psychotherapy and education has been a concern of some teachers that I have worked with and they are wary of opening up 'cans of worms' that they are not qualified to deal with. Teachers are however often working in the 'therapeutic' rather than 'Therapeutic' domain, that is to say their work is often of therapeutic benefit to children and young people, but does not involve a 'Therapeutic' contract or skills, and does not intentionally work at the level of the unconscious mind and psyche.

Conversations around sensitive issues are not new to teachers. Indeed teachers as secure attachments in children and young people's lives are often the appropriate people to have conversations that for example explore the concept of 'happiness' rather than ones that delve into psychological experiences of happiness. One head teacher (Berry, 2008) in a blog in Teaching Expertise (a free information and resources electronic magazine for teachers and school leaders) commented that; '*It is a pity, though, that some people see the label as either jargon or a cliché and fail to explore the quality of the argument and the positive evidence to support the impressive outcomes'*. Perhaps the lived experience of impact in one's own school is more compelling that the theoretical case alone.

The five SEAL skills are based on Goleman's (2004) Emotional Intelligence Inventory and are; self awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy, and social skills. The skills are structured around an annual cycle of topics designed by the National Strategies to reflect a child's school experience. For example, 'Getting on and Falling Out' is a module that targets difficulties in maintaining relationships in the middle of a school year. In 2008 SEAL became a web based resource that National Strategies intended as a starting point for schools to develop their own materials so that it would become, 'a unifying framework rather than an additional initiative' (National Strategies, 2007). Unfortunately however, SEAL became 'the box' from which SEAL assemblies or lessons were drawn. Recent evaluations by the DfE (Department of Education) (2010:2) state that

'some schools interpreted the SEAL guidance in such a way that they purposively selected pockets of activity or development to focus on, at the expense of the bigger picture'. This correlated to my observations as an educational consultant and inspector of ineffective SEAL being implemented as a bolt on subject rather than embedded in a school culture. Two years on, the National Strategies (2010:2) claim that SEAL does have impact on social and emotional skills, and, in turn, attendance and attainment, whereas the DfE (2010: 2) case study analysis states that 'analysis of our pupil level data indicated that SEAL (as indicated by our sample) failed to impact significantly upon pupils' social and emotional skills, general mental health difficulties, pro social behaviour or behaviour problems'. Deeper reading of the 2010 DfE report reveals that there was not impact in some of the sample schools exactly because SEAL had not been delivered in a sequenced, active, focussed or explicit way, nor did it exhibit fidelity to the strategy.

In undertaking my research into the efficacy of SEAL, I was hoping to encourage teachers to literally think 'outside the box', developing a way of teaching that was socially and emotionally literate itself. This would mean that the teacher needed to be socially and emotionally literate as well as the pupils. This is exemplified by them having empathy with the pupils, developing strong relationships and creating safe and welcoming environments to learn in. This contrasts to opening the SEAL box and choosing a story to teach relationships in a classroom that is not psychologically safe (due to poor teacher pupil relationships or poor peer relationships). I aspired to teachers delivering SEAL throughout the curriculum, not as a bolt on, in a climate of emotional well being. I had some ideas or assumptions about how to deepen their understanding of SEAL. These were that the teaching of SEAL needed congruence; I (and in turn they) would need to 'walk the talk', teaching in a SEAL style, modelling SEAL and being personally congruent to the message they were delivering. I also thought that 'experiencing' SEAL would deepen the teachers' personal emotional literacy and understanding of what they were asking pupils to do. Therefore, I secured Teacher

Development Agency (TDA) funding and the support of the National Strategies for a SEAL professional development project. Funding allowed me to work across Government Office North West with 100 teachers (primary and secondary mixed). The free courses were called 'Practical SEAL skills for school leadership'.

Pedagogical Approach Adopted

Whitehead (1988:4) drew my attention to teachers' practice as a value laden practical activity, created from a combination of educational theory and dialogue. Drawing on his concept of 'living theory' I proposed to teach the course in a way that was congruent with my educational theory and values. I believe from my experience that I can best teach that which I know and believe in. I find it more difficult to teach someone to do something that I cannot do, do not know about, have no experience of nor believe in myself. From this perspective I wished to develop a programme to deliver SEAL where I would be teaching in an appropriate way to enable teachers to experience SEAL themselves, encouraging them to model it to the pupils that they teach.

In asking teachers to live the theory of SEAL, they would be 'walking the talk'; modelling good SEAL practice. Modelling is a tool in neuro-linguistic programming that has found that 'excellence' in anything can be achieved by modelling or copying those excellent at what you want to achieve (Bandler, 1983). Whilst this is a rather grandiose claim, it is finding support from neuroscience. Neuro-scientific research has identified that 'mirror neurons' pick up and imitate actions, enhancing our ability to replicate them (Blakemore and Frith, 2005:161). The implications of imitation for learning are not yet fully understood. The TLRP (Teaching and Learning Research Programme) review of education and neuroscience acknowledges that there is potential for psychology and education to work together, but also caution against the adoption of models such as neuro-linguistic programming that are not fully understood or epistemologically proven (TLRP 2008:20). This echoes Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) allegations of SEAL adopting pop-psychology. Support for the concept of

modelling is also found in studies of child development that show that children copy the behaviour of significant adults in their life. This further supports the notion of modelling socially and emotionally literate teaching and learning. In this project I was modelling how to model SEAL. If teachers modelled SEAL they would increase the chance of pupils adopting it and provide the climate for SEAL to develop. I believe that teachers need self awareness themselves to be able to teach in a way that emphasises social and emotional aspects of learning, and that they would need to appreciate just what they were asking pupils to do, consequently, the teachers would be involved in self awareness exercises drawn from transactional analysis at an appropriate level. This use of personal experience to inform practice is based in the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) see Figure 1. overleaf. This cycle offers a pedagogical structure that drew on the teachers' powerful personal experiences on the course to shape the way they taught in the future. The experiential learning cycle places importance on reflective practice (Moon, 1999), this reflection in action and on action (Schön, 1983) would be critical to teachers developing their own approaches to SEAL rather than relying on 'the box'. It would support them developing their own practice and living their own theories.

Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984).
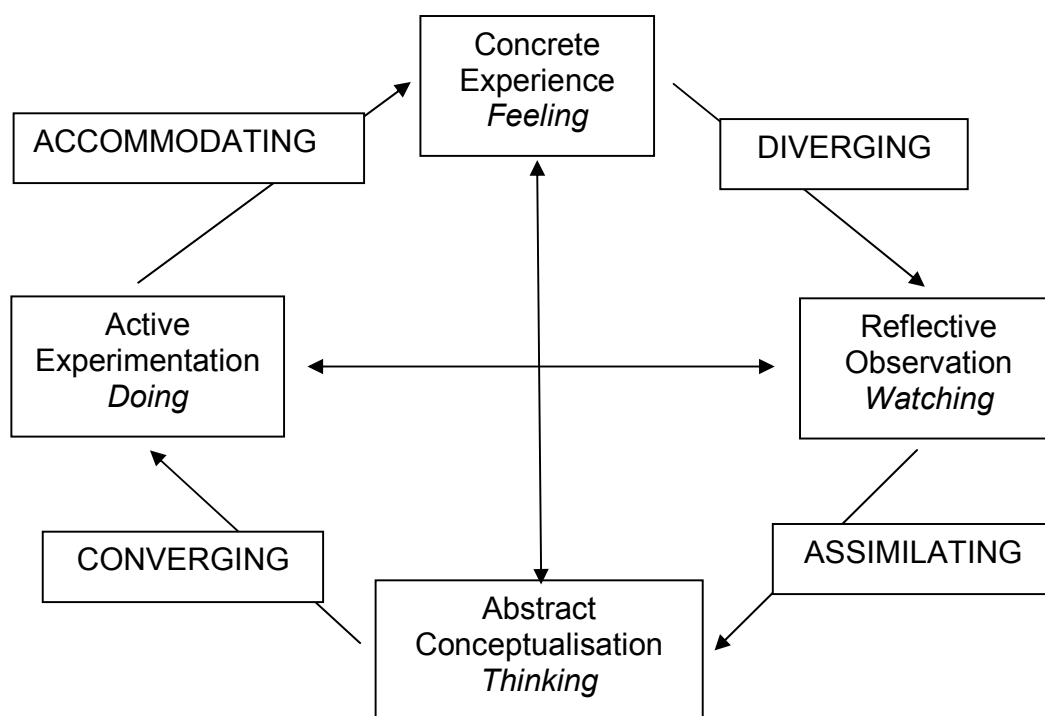
The vertical axis is the perception continuum: how we think about things.
The horizontal axis is the processing continuum: how we do things.

Methodology

Paradigmatically I situated this study within the Postpositivist school as
"Postpositivists recognise the uniqueness of situations and/or cultural groups, but
can still seek broader value in their findings"(O'Leary, 2009:7). I was seeking to
find out what was unique about the way that I taught the teachers in the context
of SEAL in a way that could be generalised to the wider teaching community and
practice. The methodology that I adopted was action research as I examined my
practice as a teacher educator and in turn was encouraging the teacher
participants to examine their practice. I was seeking to effect change in teachers'
practice in their day to day contexts, which Kemmis (2009:463) argues is the
principal aim of action research. Action research is participatory and socially
constructed, empowering the participants to effect change for themselves

(O'Leary, 2009:139). It is thus appropriate for professional development as teachers need to be willing participants rather than 'prisoners' in their own self directed professional development, they need to engage in dialogue as discussed earlier in communities of practice. This social deconstruction and reconstruction of practice enables teachers to effect change as the key actors in classrooms. McNiff (1988) conceptualised action research as a cycle. The stages of her cycle link to those used in the experiential learning cycle, aligning the pedagogical approach to the paradigm of the study. Somekh (2006) pushes claims for action research further describing it as a tool for social justice and social transformation as it 'can push against the boundaries and generate knowledge with transformative power' (2006:61). The capacity of action research to achieve change in this way is very congruent with the project that aimed to change the nature of SEAL teaching, developing social change for children and young people by developing their social and emotional skills, and liberating them from schools and classrooms that may be emotionally fraught.

Methods

A wide range of data collection tools was designed to show impact on practice. This was an important factor for TDA funding requirements and also offered me a breadth and depth of data for my action research. As the project manager and facilitator, I designed a questionnaire, survey, semi structured interviews and case studies. The evidence from these was used by a colleague researcher (Kynch) as the basis for an evaluation. The simple questionnaire collected baseline data which was used to shape understanding of the demographics of the teacher sample. The survey was used at the end of the three day programme and was followed up by telephone interviews six months later to assess the long term impact and to create two case studies. Ethical issues were considered, and all participants given right to withdraw if they wished to at any time and all identities were protected. The research adopted a thematic analysis for the qualitative data and a statistical analysis for quantitative data. The final evaluation report became an artifact that I used as the project manager to create

change and development in the completion of an action research cycle. It was unusual and effective for this third party to conduct an evaluation as one part of the broader action research, but her observations and analysis were useful in challenging assumptions that I may have had.

Findings

The 122 teachers who applied for the course were 95% female indicating a strong gender bias in people responsible for SEAL. There was a mix of phases of school, 70% secondary, 25% primary and 5% pupil referral unit or nursery setting. The teachers had a range of experience from novices who did not know what 'SEAL' meant to Head Teachers and Local Authority Advisors who had implemented SEAL widely. This would create an additional challenge for the programme in terms of meeting a diverse range of needs and experience. Despite this, the evaluation showed that views of the programme were very positive. The evaluation found evidence of positive impact as follows:

- All teachers reported a changed self awareness and attitude to teaching
- 90% reported a deeper understanding of teaching and learning
- 95% reported an increase of knowledge, skills and understanding of SEAL
- 87% reported an increase in understanding of leadership
- 97% reported congruence between the course and their value systems
- 100% reported continued motivation
- 90% could evidence impact personally, professionally, in the classroom or school.

Discussion

There were three limitations in the project that will influence the design of subsequent courses. Many participants reported wanting a longer course overall to allow them more time to implement projects in school. The TDA timeline did not allow the flexibility to amend timescales and meet this need. Attendance at the follow up cluster meetings was also low (45% of original cohort size) as the dates for these were not published with the main course dates and cover became

a difficult issue. Getting data from participants six months after the programme was also difficult and there was only a 20% response rate. This could indicate that other issues arose in school, or that the teachers were no longer interested, however a following spate of emails with the course leader shows some depth of interest sustained over time (emails discussing various aspects of practice development, requests for resources, and commissioning of further training from 24 course participants).

Overall, the principles embedded in the programme design: authentic teaching (Whitehead, 1989) or modelling (Bandler, 1983), experiential learning, and self-awareness with a self-directed (Boyatzis, 1999) action research project (Somekh, 2006) had worked.

Authentic teaching modelling SEAL

At the end of the programme, 97% of the teachers reported congruence between the course and their value systems. It is not possible to say whether this was due to a change in their values or whether they were aligned before they started the programme. The fact that so many of them did believe in SEAL made it possible for them to adopt a teaching style that was congruent with SEAL – they did not need 'winning over', but needed ideas of what a SEAL approach would look like in practice for e.g. checking how others feel, celebrating achievements, dealing with conflicts, admitting mistakes etc. After the programme the teachers adopted these practices, developing more self awareness and empathy, and practising in a more self aware and empathetic way, for example, one participant said that; '*I have analysed my own behaviours and realised the strong impact that they have on others positively and negatively'* (participant). Teachers modelled SEAL and taught in an authentic way. This I propose led to impact in their schools.

Self directed, deep learning

Analysis of the data showed that there had been increase of skills, understanding and knowledge, conventional outcomes of professional development courses.

The data also shows development of self awareness and motivation, perhaps more unconventional outcomes of teacher development courses. This combination led me to believe that the professional development had achieved 'deep' rather than 'surface' learning (Biggs 1999) and that it would be transferred beyond the 'honeymoon effect' of some professional development (Boyatzis, 2001). The evaluation states that 'the evidence provides strong satisfaction with all three aspects of: course structure, delivery style and resources, implying a highly positive impact on participants' (Kynch, 2008). The positive impact was at different levels, and for some teachers was at multiple levels. From the statistics above, it is clear that there was impact for the teachers professionally. The programme increased understanding of how to teach SEAL and how to develop a positive learning climate, meeting its aim of improving practice.

Self awareness

The third day of the professional development programme focussed on the teachers as leaders. The self awareness that they had gained in the first two days gave them new insights into how they enacted their leadership of SEAL and how they interacted with other staff in the school – this was reported by 87% of the teachers as beneficial to their understanding of leadership. Anecdotally the teachers also reported personal benefits in addition to the professional ones, such as new insights into relationships at home. The effect of the teachers attending the programme was impact in school. Teachers could identify this at the level of classrooms, departments, staff rooms and whole schools.

Experiential learning

So what had led to this impact? The evaluation by Kynch (2008) pulled the different elements of the programme together into a model of praxis, turning 'theory into practice'. The model was developed inductively from the data, as shown in Figure 2. overleaf. The stages of; insight, understanding, relevance and application map onto the experiential learning cycle supporting the view that experiential learning was crucial to the learning process. A number of comments
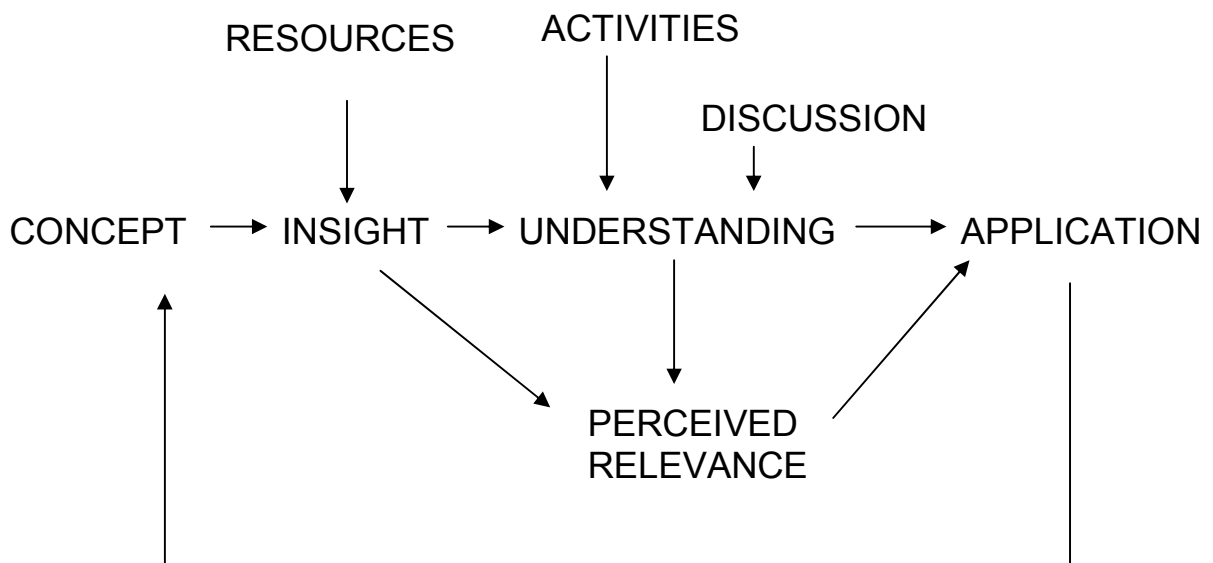
by teachers also support the use of experiential learning. One participant commented that: '*Time to think through and verbalise has developed my understanding of SEAL and enabled me to become a more reflective practitioner confident in SEA',* showing that stimulus and reflection have had impact on transfer of learning into day to day practice. The report concluded that;

> through exceptionally clear resources and experiential learning it succeeded in guiding SEAL leaders towards understanding how some theories ….. can be a practical tool for teachers seeking to understand SEAL and that they use it to shape and change the motivation, behaviour, emotions of themselves, their pupils and their school teams (Kynch, 2008).

Figure 2. The Theory – Context Model.

RESOURCES   ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION

CONCEPT → INSIGHT → UNDERSTANDING → APPLICATION

PERCEIVED RELEVANCE

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Authentic course delivery

It is hard to identify how much the authenticity of the course delivery impacted on the learning that occurred. 100% of the comments about the style of delivery were positive, 80% of the participants said it was excellent. Many pulled out the

fact that it was supportive and relaxed in style. Others commented on its effective structure and on how knowledgeable the trainer was. One participant came close to describing authenticity in stating that the delivery was '*vibrant and extremely SEAL!!*' (participant). A second said: '*It was excellent, calming but engaging. She recognised the feelings of the group and changed the pace accordingly*' (participant). This demonstrates that there was some SEAL process in place. Unfortunately, the surface level evaluation question; 'what do you think about the course delivery style?' was not adequately targeted to elicit a response around the authenticity of the delivery style, however the engagement of the group and the comments specific to SEAL style go some way to corroborate that this deliberate delivery choice was evident and worked.

Use of additional models and tools to encourage thinking outside the box

The course had drawn heavily on models from emotional intelligence, transactional analysis and neuro linguistic programming in order to develop the teachers' self awareness. An example of this is the discussion of teachers limiting beliefs to help them to understand the impact of limiting beliefs for children and young people. Twenty percent of the teachers identified individual transactional analysis concepts as particularly useful in developing their self-awareness and consequently, quality of teaching showing that their personal experience of these models deepened their learning. It is unclear why the transactional analysis models were favoured over the neuro linguistic programming models that were not mentioned at all. Throughout the evaluation there are references to the personal and professional impact of the self awareness exercises that were the 'experience' that they reflected on and would model and apply in classrooms. '*I have personally discovered how I think and feel and behave and this has influenced how I deal with others and interactions*' (participant). This again substantiates the value of the experiential learning in bringing to life the content of the course so it is practice rather than rhetoric.

Action Research

Action research was used to two ways. Firstly, it was used to structure the teachers' in-school SEAL project. This would ensure that the teachers had an opportunity to test out a SEAL idea whilst still on the course and feedback on how it had gone. It would also help to bridge the gap between the course and their work place. The projects were successful in terms of applying the learning in schools, creating professional dialogue and stimulating reflection. It also aided the creation of a community of practice as teachers shared the resources that they had made – some strategic tools such as audits and other more practical lesson resources. The evaluation followed the plans and impact of two schools in case study format and demonstrated that the action research cycle had led to school improvement initiatives being fully implemented and evaluated as part of the school development plans.

Action research was used as the methodology to see whether the professional development course offered was effective or not. Whilst evaluation is extremely useful in professional development programmes, it does not necessarily lead to improvement in practice. The development of this evaluation into an action research project (for me and for the teachers) involved bridging the gap between findings and change. It ensured that I had an opportunity to reflect on my practice, weigh it and measure it, and use the findings to inform my future pedagogy. This has led to review of a leadership programme to reflect the leadership values I am promoting in the way that I lead it. The methodological finding is therefore that action research is a powerful tool for developing pedagogy at all levels of education, and is recommended to all teacher educators and all teachers.

Conclusion

The notion of 'walking the talk' leads to a tentative conclusion that the process is the content in these courses. The course leader was 'walking the talk', and this led to deep learning characterised by transition and duration of learning. The teaching was powerful as it was centred on an appropriate process rather than

knowledge alone. It was the process of this course which led to its success; the programme was overwhelmingly rated highly effective and inspiring, and exceptionally well designed and delivered, by almost every participant, and favourably compared with all other courses. The conversion of 'concept to context' was an outstanding feature (Kynch, 2008). It is my hope that the teachers will also 'walk the talk' and so deliver powerful SEAL experiences, and develop a SEAL ethos in their classrooms that will contribute to the pupils' success in school. In the light of the DfE 2010 report that showed that fidelity was necessary for positive impact in schools, I can additionally conclude that alongside the development of autonomy from the support resources, the programme had scaffolded in fidelity to core principles, leading to the success of the projects that the teachers subsequently led.

The teachers' evaluations suggest that the teaching repertoire of some was increased beyond use of the National Strategy resources. They felt they were enabled to think 'out of the box' and 'live' the theory. This was achieved through teaching with authenticity, experiential learning, and action research. There is tentative evidence to suggest that the pedagogical approach embedded deep learning across five levels; the teachers learned; professionally, personally, interpersonally, pedagogically, and organisationally with school improvement projects. One thing that remains unclear is whether it was the sum of these parts that led to the impact as the research suggests 'Participants valued the experience of reflective practice promoted by the substance, sequencing and structure of the programme' (Kynch, 2008). I question whether any of these elements on their own would lead to such impact, and this could be the focus of future research, to establish whether authenticity alone would promote deep learning, or whether it is reliant on experiential learning.

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