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How participants in a higher education management development programme conceptualize its influence on their professional lives. (0128)

OUTLINE

Context

The question of 'what works' has been threaded through educational research since 2001 with the advent of the US Education Act tying funding to 'scientifically-proven methods' and the subsequent debates between, for example, Slavin (2002, 2004), Berliner (2002) and Olson (2004); in the UK, this has been more or less implicit in the agenda since the start of the New Labour government in 1997 with its emphasis on market competition (Furlong, 2004). Formal evaluation, envisaged by Robson (2002) as inevitably political and always instrumentalist, sits well in the audit culture. In educational research this may have represented a shift in direction, a retrenchment from the broader social aims of the 60s and 70s, but research on management development has never aimed to be anything but instrumentalist. Since Guest's 1987 model for 'human resource management in a business context' proposed a tightly-structured 'strategic fit' between corporate objectives and staff development strategies, the focus in management development has largely been on proving the effectiveness of programmes to management boards through 'return on investment' measurement (e.g. Bird, 2010). In educational research, however, the difficulty of measuring 'impact' of initiatives continues to be debated fruitfully, resulting in more sensitive and sophisticated assessment approaches (e.g. Coburn, 2003), particularly in higher education (e.g. McAlpine *et al*, 2007). In higher education, shifts in organizational culture, especially with regard to internal governance (McNay, 1995) and changes in the nature of administrative roles (Whitchurch, 2008) have added to the complexity of managers' roles and lives. This has required managers increasingly to attend to the distinctions between 'craft-knowledge' and 'background knowledge' or understanding (Schwab, 1971; Shulman, 1986; Leinhard, 1990; Calderhead, 1991).

Method

This research, undertaken as part of an MSc in Educational Research Methodology, is an inquiry into the influence of a professional development programme for managers in higher education on the professional practice of participants. Participants are mostly administrative staff but occasionally include principal investigators, or academics who are also managing staff. The research aims to explore and describe this influence and participants' conceptualization of their professional practice, through the use of open-field questionnaires in three separate, iterative stages, followed by interviews with a purposive sample. The programme started 10 years ago; approximately 700 people have participated in that time. Attrition of current contact details reduces the proportion of the population available for sampling to approximately 250. A pilot questionnaire was distributed to a cohort of recent past participants (Cohort A, n=39) and asked about the influence of the programme on their working lives; another was distributed to a cohort of future participants (Cohort B, n=17) and asked about what they hoped and expected to gain from the programme. This stage presented 'influence' and 'professional practice' as 'sensitizing concepts' (Blumer, 1954). Based on the findings, the questionnaire has been designed to explore further the influence of the programme in terms of understanding and techniques. A final version of the

questionnaire is to be distributed to the entire sample of past participants who are still accessible (n≈250). Purposive sampling from a convenience sample, combined with open-field questionnaires, was intended to enable the richest possible data to be gathered for a flexible, iterative exploratory design involving emergent research questions. At a relatively early stage in the research, it is becoming clear that this research design sits well within an organization in which learning and development opportunities are values-led and research-informed; it is able to yield rich data and to inform emergent research questions; and it does justice to the personal agency of the staff who participate in the programme.

Analysis

The pilot questionnaire yielded twelve completed questionnaires. The data were, as hoped, rich, especially in the case of Cohort A who, having undergone the programme, have been encouraged to think reflectively about themselves and their development. For a relatively small amount of qualitative data a thematic analysis is appropriate, having an intuitive appeal where general themes are sought for purposes of conceptualization. Main and subsidiary themes emerged through an initial close reading and re-reading, and a framework developed using these themes, with responses sorted into 'cells'. This enabled identification of the relative strength (in terms of emphasis of language as well as frequency of occurrence) of certain themes. In this analysis, the only safeguard against bias (which could be manifested in theme development or in coding decisions) is openness and reflexivity on the part of the researcher: cross-checking between the themes, coding decisions and source material helped to provide dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:294).

Findings

Cohort A respondents, as well as generally providing richer data, have a more complex conceptualization of their own development than do Cohort B participants. The themes which emerged were (1) self-discovery; (2) improved relationships through new insights; (3) increased confidence and well-being; (4) craft-knowledge; (5) background knowledge, particularly of managing in the higher education context; and (6) sharing experiences with peers.

In particular, Cohort A tended to distinguish, sometimes explicitly, between elements which have been characterised in the analysis as 'craft-knowledge' and 'background knowledge' or understanding (Schwab, 1971; Shulman, 1986; Leinhard, 1990; Calderhead, 1991). In contrast, Cohort B, asked what they hoped to gain from the programme, made little or no reference to background understanding. Answers to the questions 'Please tell us what you hope to gain from participating in [the programme]' and 'What are the three areas in your professional life you most want to develop?' focussed on 'people management' which emerged as the overwhelmingly predominant theme. This was described in terms of 'knowledge' or of 'understanding' or of 'skills' or of 'techniques' with no distinction; process (particularly problem-solving) is conflated with background understanding.

Conclusion

Cohort A's distinction between craft-knowledge and understanding appears to arise through exposure to the ideas on the programme (although it is not explicitly mentioned on the programme). Respondents appear to have gained a more nuanced conceptualization of their own professional development: later stages of the research will investigate how this distinction comes about and what its implications are for professional practice and professional development in higher education.

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