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Taking action that matters: a dynamic approach to professional development and teacher learning

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Abstract

There is no doubt that education has been forced to adapt to an ever-changing reality. This paper explains the permanent call for today’s teachers' professional development as they face an increasing number of challenges. High quality teacher education and high quality teaching are directly influencing student achievement and consequently the learning outcomes. This paper also presents a model that outlines the process of teacher change, particularly through staff development programs. The method chosen is therefore qualitative, and the study may be described as a case-study. The present paper is an exploration of a bound system through in-depth data collection comprising several sources: teachers’ journals, staff meeting minutes, ICT personal folders, peer-teaching reflection forms or classroom observation feedback. The results of all consulted sources indicate the positive impact of internal teacher training initiatives, based on the specific needs of each school and, nevertheless, requires for an emergent need for the improvement of teachers’ knowledge and skills. In-school teacher training programs are the first step to switching perspectives: the teachers can treat the evolution of education in the society of knowledge with resignation and resistance or they can turn it into moments of self-knowledge and deeper understanding of students’ diversity as connected to human nature development.

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1. Introduction

The intent of this article is to underscore the need for a profound transformation in the training processes of teachers and thereby in teaching practices. From ancient teaching stories told around the campfire to demonstrations...
and exploration of the latest interactive multimedia tools, teaching as much as learning has significantly evolved. It has never been more significant the increasing pressure on schools to ensure that all students achieve higher standards of learning. A successful professional development plan is meant to help both newcomers and experienced professionals gain further insights into their own teaching and that of others. Teaching is a set of craft skills, values, beliefs and practices that can be added to and improved at all stages even of a lifelong career. There are teachers close to retirement who are still willing to innovate, to look closely at what they do in the classroom, at what their pupils learn, and to reflect alone or with others on how to improve their practice.

2. Literature Backdrops

The concept of change (e.g., personal, professional and/or social) as well as “the power and potential of risk and challenge in learning” (Clover, 2006, p. 56) are strong common undercurrents. Additional research indicates that teachers understand the value of reflection, contemplative practices, critical inquiry, and engaged dialogue to heightened states of consciousness or awareness for creating new ways of thinking. Expanding knowledge systems to promote a shift in worldviews, and taking action to build and sustain a socially just society. In-school training activities are part of an innovative perspective in response to a continuously changing education environment. It stands to reason that teachers must be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to make the paradigm shift from their old subjects and learning objectives to technology education by means of teaching communities. According to Lortie (1975) teachers tend to practice their craft as well as learn about their profession in isolation from their colleagues. Traditionally, teachers have taught in their individual classrooms with the doors closed to any outside influences. “Historically, schools have been structured so that teachers work alone, rarely given time together to plan lessons, share instructional practices, assess students, design curriculum, or help make administrative or Hammond et al., 2009, p.11). Research, however, has shown that teachers who engage in collaboration have improved perceptions of their own identities as well as satisfaction from their work (C. Day, Kington, Stobart, & Samm collaboration is a significant task, as it entails both a challenge to educational tradition as well as the structure of the school day. In order to effect change, administrators may be required to restructure the school time-table to facilitate opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively in a professional learning community.

The cascade model of change implementation is facilitated by the national teacher training system. The ‘master trainers’ cascade the information to district officials, who cascade the information to teachers in their districts. Large numbers of teachers gather at central venues for this training and are supposed to ‘cascade’ the message down to their colleagues. In is acknowledged that each time the information is cascaded, the message becomes more diluted and distorted. The cascade model has been widely criticized as an inadequate model for delivering effective training (Khulisa, 1999; CEPD, 2001; HSRC, 2000; University of Pretoria and NAPTOSA submissions). In the Romanian educational context, it failed to prepare either officials or school-based teachers for the complexity of the implementation of the new national curriculum. In the first instance the ‘cascading’ of information resulted in the ‘watering down’ and/or misinterpretation of crucial information. Secondly, trainers lacked confidence, knowledge and understanding to manage the training process (Khulisa, 2001).

The term “professional learning community” has become commonplace in current school reform discourses (Alberta Commission on Learning, 2003; Alberta Education, 2006; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006; Williams, Brien, Sprague, & Sullivan, 2008). In England Day (1999) refers to ‘professional development’ as “natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is a process by which, through reflection and discussion with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purpose of teaching... ”(p. 4). Traditional professional development for teachers has been criticized for being irrelevant, ineffective, and fractured, and for not giving teachers what they actually need to teach students (Corcoran, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

In any responsible school, public or private, rural or urban, the professional development actions are meant to foster an organizational culture that values knowledge, sharing knowledge, and innovation and risk taking in the development of knowledge. Teacher professional development sessions are designed for the in-service teachers to discover, develop, utilize, deliver, and absorb knowledge inside the school through an appropriate management
process to meet current and future needs (Quintas et al., 1997). The such a school, the professional development framework is fundamentally based on Knowledge Management (KM) approach. As the literature reveals, KM is a process that helps organizations find, select, organize, disseminate, and transfer important information and expertise necessary for activities (Gupta et al., 2000). KM is the creation, extraction, transformation and storage of the correct knowledge and information in order to design better policy, modify action and deliver results (Horwitch and Armacost, 2002).

3. The research procedure

In the next section, we will draw upon a case study of teacher professional development in a private school in Bucharest, and examine how professional learning and knowledge management are conceptualized in policies and teachers’ understandings of their own professional development. Applying the case study methodology, we used a variety of data sources, including questionnaires, reflective essays, personal communications, and field notes to study the “bounded system” (Merriam, 1998) of participants in the professional training activities. The case study is a methodology that provided us with the ability to examine the professional development as a whole, giving an in-depth look at the experience from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Case studies rely primarily on qualitative methods, although quantitative data may be used to support emergent themes (Creswell, 2007). Avenor College is a public Kindergarten to Grade 8 private school in northern side of Bucharest. Teaching staff consists of 56 teachers (full-time and part-time) and has an enrolment of 210 students. While the data presented in this paper is part of a larger study, the reflective essays or field notes data were collected in the last 6 months.

4. The findings of study

4.1. Paradigms of change

The school-based continuous teaching development model implemented by Avenor College, a private school in Bucharest, outlines the imperative re-establishment of contact with theory and methodology in order to maintain the ‘extended professional’ (Collins, 1991, p.69). It assists in shaping teachers who are not only skilled in the classroom, but who have a grasp of wider thinking about the learner’s area and about educational issues in general (Steyl, 1998, p.112). This professional development framework endeavors to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes to empower the new teachers (in their first year of teaching in a private school) in order to assist them to survive in a profession for which they are not enough skilled, and further development of experienced private school teachers. According to Edwards (1991) the school-based continuous teaching development model has as basic point of departure that training occurs within the normal working milieu and is managed mainly, but not completely, by the school’s own personnel in order to fulfil the immediate and specific needs of the school (Gettly, 2002). This model was developed in an effort to overcome the problems of the centralized continuous teaching development model (Craft, 1996, Gettly, 2002).

The in-school teacher training program frameworks based on research and proven practice that use developmental and continuous improvement cycles grounded in reflective cycle of continuous improvement and the developmental cycle of plan, teach, reflect, and apply. Avenor College of Bucharest designed the in-school teacher training program based on Fullan’s (2001) culture of change principles. In such conditions, a very important purpose of school leadership proves to be motivating teachers to deepen and always enlarge their own knowledge (including lifelong learning programs). When teachers participate in dialogue, they become aware of the many approaches and ways of doing things, are engaged locate themselves in current and potential practice (Coldron & Smith, 1999). “Starting with teachers’ knowledge dignifies the ‘wisdom of practice’ and helps open teachers’ classrooms to inquiry, breaks the isolation that keeps teachers from becoming colleagues and forms the basis for a professional learning community” (2009, p.469). Having a stable, responsible and devoted group of teachers is a key ingredient to initiating an effective in-school teacher training program.
4.2. Celebration of teaching

The Avenor teacher training activities consist of formal and less formal processes. Formal processes are designed to enable development in specific target areas, related to teachers’ community circles or didactic degrees. Formal Avenor training activities are believed to provide a concentrated focus on the specifics of change. Less formal Avenor training processes are those activities that happen during the daily life of a school. Mentoring, coaching, delegating, team-teaching and rotation of responsibilities are regarded as less formal types of training activities (Steyl, 1998: 113). The following aspects are usually addressed in Avenor Training programs:

- equalisation of teachers through upgrading academic and professional qualifications, as well as classroom skills and teaching strategies;
- efficiency of classrooms and schools as microcosmos through proper management training;
- classroom competence through effective input on subject knowledge, theory, subject methodology and educational philosophy;
- empowerment through action research and teacher-led initiatives (Steyl, 1998: 125).

The Avenor model has a more decentralized structure although it respects the centralized structures, too (didactic degrees, etc). Here, the cascade approach implies training from top to bottom in which coordinating teachers from each department are trained by the main teacher trainer of the school. These coordinating teachers (primary coordinator, English Department Coordinator, PSHE coordinator, gymnasium coordinator or Clubs Coordinator cascade the knowledge and understanding to experienced teachers in their department who in turn cascade the information to teachers without any substantial experience or newcomers in their group (age level group, school subject group, etc). The professional development coordinator shares the responsibility for equipping teachers so that they can provide quality education. There are four goals taken into account: fostering intrinsic motivation to teaching, engaging teachers and students in continuous improvement, inspiring collective or teamwork and affecting all teachers. Based on the description of Gettly (2002), the Avenor College training program aims at the needs and expectations of the teachers, planning practical training activities. Additionally, training activities are planned to occur continuously, giving teachers the opportunity for professional development and growth. Overall, the school management team must be informed and supportive.

In a private school where teaching involves a common framework of working day team-teaching, collaborative teaching become possible. Beyond the daily lessons, teachers are an active part to team’s membership, purpose and goals, structure, rules, roles, strengths, skills, improvements needed, methods for arriving at decisions, meeting dates, process for collecting information and means of communicating with members. In the words of Edwards (1991: 42) „the most effective efforts for change to take place close to the action, are concrete, teacher-specific, are focused on practical problems, involve teachers in project decisions, include classroom assistance, and have regular meetings that focus on practical problems” During departmental planning sessions every individual teacher develops materials, resources, classroom activities, pedagogical techniques, and practical insight into learning and development of the school community. Multiple perspectives are offered from team members regarding adherence to the team teaching contracts. Peer-observation and team-teaching sessions focus on teachers’ ability to make sense of what is going on in the classroom. Teachers observe each other’s lessons based on a previous plan, give constructive feedback and possible solutions to specific issues, initiate further action-steps. They may focus on planning, generating interest in the task, or even coming up with reasons to delay their work—all of the teaching approaches. In this way, misunderstandings and lack of ability to handle different classroom management aspects are dismounted, effective teaching happens.

Mentoring sessions aim to encourage the creation of knowledge; to capture and consolidate knowledge through effective analogies and models; to integrate and disseminate knowledge to people throughout the organization; and to present explicit knowledge as experience for vivid learning (Carroll et. al., 2003). Each training activity points out the importance of the taking-action steps. Each teacher is directly involved in this broad process of training. For instance, at Avenor College the cross-curricular themes or weekly Assemblies are being addressed by following a rotation program where topics related to real world are taught by means of a team approach. Each pair of teachers (a primary teacher and a gymnasium teacher) is responsible for at least one theme per semester during the school-year.
round. This method in turn gives rise to some challenges. Where teachers have been accustomed to an individual approach in the past, they are now expected to function as part of a team. This team-work approach is not always done justice.

On completion of these monthly workshops, teachers must develop the ability to incorporate ideas into their teaching immediately, and master a information base from which to plan intelligently for the future. Every effort is made to keep the materials they process and the tools they use as accessible as possible, so that they can replicate the workshop in their classrooms with minimum financial implications. Against a backdrop of complex and ever-changing regulatory settings, a consensus view has emerged that education must support all students in meeting grade level proficiency standards, even in an environment with diminishing resources to address those needs.

5. Discussions

It is equally important, as a preliminary step, to situate this critical reflection on the practices of teacher education in a framework of adult education. The subject approach here was based on three questions. First, why should practices in teacher education change? This first question necessarily led us to questioning the reasons for expecting, promoting, or sometimes even imposing change. Second, what needs to change? What aspects should this change address? Third, but certainly not least, how can change be accomplished? How can trainers modify their teaching-training practices? It is common to hear “We tried this. It didn’t work.” The purpose of continuous teaching development is to upgrade teachers’ classroom skills and teaching strategies and to provide teachers with subject knowledge, theory, and instructional methodology. Moreover, it aims to cover a broad range of activities designed to contribute to the learning of teachers who have completed their in-school training. The focus of this view is to assist teachers to keep up to date with the rapid and numerous changes taking place in the continuously changing education environment. All these being considered, significant changes do not happen overnight. It is necessary a strategic approach, focused on redesigning in-school training and applying knowledge in ways that enable high-quality teacher learning experiences and empower teachers to personalize learning and manage an optimized learning enterprise in the classroom.

If we take into account the way primary teachers are expected to implement the new curriculum (adopted just one year ago) in their classrooms without being adequately trained in content and/or instructional methodology, it is easy to emphasize that, at a national scale, these teachers are confused by the new rules as they had been accustomed to traditional instructional design. Teachers teaching 5-6 years old students are unsure of how to approach lesson planning in the new learning area of math and science integrated school subject (mostly just in title), what to teach learners in class, and how to facilitate the learning area at this age level. Consequently, they teach content and skills related to their previous experiences whenever they have been teaching to first grade level by simply using a similar approach, thereby neglecting the procedural knowledge concerning this school age characteristics. Even if some of the teachers teaching K level obtained a teaching degree for early years education and primary education, as well, this is not enough.

Another challenge for teachers of K level is that they were used to focusing on only one school subject at a time, while the new integrated school subjects such as Math and Environmental Exploration or Music and Movement require a teacher to be well versed in transdisciplinary competences. This implies a shift from the traditional individualistic approach, where each teacher was responsible for independent school subjects, to a situation where a teacher is not only an expert in a cross-curricular approach to teaching and learning. Actually, teachers were simply given the new policy documents for K -1 level and told that these replaced the old syllabus. These documents are very confusing to some teachers and very difficult to interpret if one is faced with a very unfamiliar learning area. Because teachers are ill-equipped, to implement a new learning area in which they have inadequate background or experience, they must be trained, and this can be done by means of continuing professional teacher development to adapt to their new environment.

The school-based continuous teaching development model aims to increase teachers’ access to the latest educational theories and practices, in order to decrease the gap between the conventional, old-fashioned way of teaching and the proactive, interactive strategies that maximize learning, stimulate creative and critical thinking, develop the capacity to initiate and cope with change and innovate. In the feedback from the first years of initiating
this new approach of in-school training program a certain change in mindset has become evident, and as mentioned before the teachers’ experience of the continuous professional development as being rewarding and fruitful is conducive to good classroom practice. It is our sincerely belief that school reform can be seen as systemic innovation in knowledge management (Hargreaves, 1999; Carroll et. al., 2003). For schools to be more effective organizations, teachers must understand and help to define administrative and curricular goals and standards.

Admittedly this research is still in its infant stage and more research is necessary to determine the full impact of the project. The preliminary findings discussed do however give an indication of what can be further researched. The main benefits of the teacher training activities as they resulted from teachers’ feedback are the following:

- improvement of relationships and communication;
- permanent guidance from specialists in adult training and life-long programs;
- encouragement, support, and recognition for sharing classroom resources and professional knowledge.
- increasing enthusiasm and commitment to the job responsibilities;
- development of an organizational thinking- aloud capability;

Some of the barriers teachers pointed out are:

- lack of parents’ support and confidence;
- effort to accomplish extra-class responsibilities, more common in a corporation;
- too much complicated internal policies and procedures;

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the private educational offer builds, through concrete educational actions, the paradigm of adapting school to the student’s requirements and possibilities, a feature of education in the future. Predictable benefits are to be highlighted. To attract students, parents, teachers and other social stakeholders on the side of the change, the purpose of the new trends in education and the expected benefits and quality are clearly explained, demonstrating that the effort made will be rewarded with better results in learning.

It is expected that at the end of each evaluation period teachers should have competency areas improved and developed, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values-related to effective teaching. Therefore, the teacher and his attitude to knowledge play an essential part within this process. At the end of the school-year, all the professional development actions and appropriate leadership dispositions are assessed and standardized models are planned to be developed to in order to raise student performance and give direction for future growth.

References


