QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN PRACTICE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Quality is one of the key concept which is broadly discussed within the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Process. Within the Lisbon process, enhancing the quality of teacher education is an important goal for European education systems, if quicker progress is to be made towards meeting the common objectives that have been established under the Education and Training 2010 programme. In response to the Council's identification of teacher education and its quality as a key issue in the quality of teaching, in 2002 the Commission established an expert group to reflect upon on improving the education of teachers and trainers, which brought together the representatives of the 31 countries that participate in the Education and Training 2010 work programme.

1 Introduction

In his article on mobility and the European dimension in teacher education Pavel Zgaga (2008) noted that teacher education studies 'are more complex than most other studies in higher education' and he pointed out the following elements of this complexity: interdisciplinary character of teacher education as a university area; initial vs. continuous teacher education; parallel vs. consecutive mode; and quality.

Quality is one of the key concept which is broadly discussed within the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Process. Within the Lisbon process, enhancing the quality of teacher education is an important goal for European education systems, if quicker progress is to be made towards meeting the common objectives that have been established under the Education and Training 2010 programme. In response to the Council's identification of

teacher education and its quality as a key issue in the quality of teaching, in 2002 the Commission established an expert group to reflect upon on improving the education of teachers and trainers, which brought together the representatives of the 31 countries that participate in the Education and Training 2010 work programme. In the spring of 2004, a sub-group of this expert group, in cooperation with the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (also established by the European Commission under the same framework), addressed the question of developing suitable indicators for measuring improvement in thee education of teachers and, in particular, their continuing professional development. The group has identified the development of systems for the evaluation and accreditation of the initial and in-service education of teachers as one of the priorities involved in improving teacher education.

In their interim report on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, the Council and the Commission underlined the urgency of reforms and the central importance of the motivation and quality of education and training staff. Accordingly, in 2005 the Commission worked with experts nominated by the member states to produce "Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications". A set of common principles for teacher competences and qualifications was drawn up in cooperation with experts and tested in 2005 at a European Conference of senior policy makers, experts in the field of teacher education and major stakeholders.

2 Practitioner research: main premises and the nature

Practitioner research is closely related to, and draws on, the methodologies of the "family of action research", including participatory research, critical action research, classroom action research; action learning. Practitioner research does draw on methods from a wider field than action research. Among the ways of collecting data one can find case studies, ethnographic studies, biographical and narrative research. Different forms of practitioner research today are the culmination of long processes of evolution and contestation, which included efforts both inside and outside education Herr, and Nihlen (1994) said, a number of calls emerged during the early part of the 20th century for teachers to actively participate in research carried out in their classrooms in cooperation with academic researchers. This cooperation in educational research was something that would lead to the greater professionalization of teaching and to raising its status in the society. Nowadays, one can say that practitioner research is often used as an umbrella term for a large number of research-based activities undertaken in the fields of practice in education. It implies that practitioners will learn from their research into practice which is not always the case in other forms of research. It also aims at improving rather than proving as an 4 approach to research. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler argue that in the field of practice based research, those involved in practitioner inquiry are bound to engage with both "theoretical" and –"practical" knowledge "moving seamlessly between the two". Thus, the term "practitioner" research encompasses various types of research, which are a particular way of exploring the world in order to improve it, and it is connected with a particular way of collecting research materials. Different types of practitioner research refer to a variety of personal, professional, and political motivations for conducting research. What connects all the approaches called "practitioner research" is the fact that they root from one problematic situation - a practical one - they result from the emerging need of the researcher to be active, to introduce change. At the same time it allows him to reflect deeply on his own action and its results. In these types of research we experience not so much the situation in which theory is created to be applied in practice, but rather the situation in which there is a transition from practical actions to theoretical generalizations.

3 Practitioner research: developing a research partnership

Building relationships between school and university is a really important aspect of any collaborative research partnership. However, from a school perspective and university perspective, there are significant barriers that need to be overcome before effective working relationships between school- and university-based researchers can be forged. Some of these barriers have their origins in peoples' past experiences, while others are based on shared myths and common misconceptions of universities and academics.

Different expectations of research between universities and schools lead to the situation in which knowledge creation of itself is not the starting point for many teachers doing research and indeed some of the new knowledge arising from practitioner research may not be recognised if not immediately relevant to the desired outcome improvement in practice. Practitioners usually value findings that have a direct application in classrooms while

academic researchers are rewarded by publication in academic journals that many practitioners usually do not read. Many academic researchers see knowledge creation as the main function of doing research, but they arguably have a limited view of the relationship between knowledge, practice and research. Some practitioners believe that education research is largely quantitative and abstract and that it is not relevant to their specific context. I would argue that we need to cross boundaries to close the gap between theory and practice in education and to achieve praxis. Praxis is action and it refers to, in general sense, all intentional activities by which people can reach a particular goal through their own efforts. So it is not just universities crossing the boundary to collaborate in research and work in schools but schools crossing the boundary to work and perfect their research

skills at universities. Frederick Erickson, in the third edition of the "Handbook of Research 7 on Teaching" (1986), discussed research collaborations involving academics and teachers and he said: 'A few steps beyond collaborative research involving teachers and academic researchers is for the classroom teacher to become the researcher in his or her own right'. Erickson went on to argue that more teachers need to take on the

responsibility of conducting educational research: 'If classroom teaching in elementary and secondary schools is to come of age as a profession—if the role of teacher is not to continue

to be infantilized—then teachers need to take the adult responsibility of investigating their own practice systematically and critically, by methods that are appropriate to their practice. . . Time needs to be made available in the school day for teachers to do this. Anything less than that basic kind of institutional change is to perpetuate the passivity that has characterized the teaching profession in its relations with

administrative supervisors and the public at large.' Many teachers are concerned about time and abilities, and still see teaching as a consuming, complex activity, which is made even less manageable when research is an

additional requirement, even though it is exactly that experience of teaching complexity that makes teachers' input vital to research and reflection on teaching. Teachers are already overburdened with curriculum requirements, accountability requirements, and all the day to day pressures of keeping a classroom running wonder why they should take on one more thing. This concern is justifiable and understandable, however, it is a misconception

that sees research as a separate activity from teaching. For many teachers, research is an optional extra. Teachers must realize that research is doable because it stems from their own teaching practice. They should become aware of their own practices and the beliefs that underpin them, construct their knowledge and become active participants in research. They must acquire research skills and confidence necessary for disseminating small-scale but high quality research findings, thus making public their knowledge, beliefs and practice. As researchers of their own practice, teachers can discover for themselves how deeply theoretical their work is and has always been. This discovery can position them in a new relation to university theory. Theory is no longer what "they" do at the university, but becomes what "we" do in our classrooms every day.

4 Practitioner research and quality improvement in Teacher Education

Practitioner research is particularly important for Higher Education Institutions and schools willing to "evolve" their culture to a quality improvement culture. It is essential, therefore, to try to understand how practitioner research can affect the quality of teacher education. It needs to be stressed that the effectiveness of teaching in schools would be significantly improved if teaching were a research-based profession and if teachers were to play a central

role in carrying out educational research. The idea of teachers conducting research on educational practice came from the work to the work of John Dewey and Kurt. John Dewey (1929) argued that the motives of actions and the problems that pupils experience should constitute the starting point for all situations connected with teacher's work. This makes teaching unpredictable to some extent, and makes it necessary for the teachers themselves to constantly reflect through research. In the 1940's Kurt Lewin, whose interest was in inter-group conflict, and in conflict between individual and group wishes, demonstrated that groups, organizations, and communities which aspire to perfecting their own practice by for instance introducing some changes into them will have to conduct research on their own actions, investigating their own norms and values. Beginning in the late 1940's, Stephen Corey launched the "teacher-as-researcher" movement at Columbia University Teachers College to foster teacher professionalism and to build classroom research cultures. He saw action research mainly as an instrument to encourage teachers and principals to use research findings and to change the way their schools were organized. Corey started a new approach to the type of research called "action research", combining it with increasing the involvement in the workplace and local community. Corey perceived "action research" as a common ground for agreement between practitioners: teachers and principals, who collaborated with external researchers. A decline of the cooperative action research movement in the United States was signaled by move in: the funding of educational research to the federal level, the disassociation of

the American Educational Research Association from the National Education Association (in 1967), an increased reliance on a research, development, and dissemination model of educational research, and in the establishment of research and development centers at universities across the country. Following this decline of action research in the United States, the idea of action research in the field of education emerged in the United Kingdom in the context of school-based curriculum development in the 1960's. In the intervening years, action research has increased in education. Teachers in some innovative secondary modern schools attempted to restructure and reconceptualize the humanities curriculum that the ideas of "teacher-as-researcher", teaching as a reflexive practice and teaching as a form of inquiry

emerged. This teacher-led movement was perceived as a vehicle for participatory change, professional development, school restructuring and curriculum reform. Through these times action research has continued to hold an attraction for educators as a democratic alternative to administratively imposed change, promising to bridge the so-called "theory-practice gap". The "bottom up" curriculum reform work initiated by British teachers and later conceptualized and recorded by academics like John Elliott, Lawrence Stenhouse, Jean Rudduck, and Clem Adelman

involved many different initiatives designed to make the curriculum more relevant to the lives of students. Stephen Kemmis, who had spent some time at the University of East Anglia, introduced action research to Australia, and, together with Wilfred Carr, developed an epistemological basis for action research in the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas.

5 Conclusions

This paper aims to highlight the importance of supporting quality improvement culture in teacher education through promoting a research interactive partnership between universities and schools, which can be a basis for knowledge creation. In the contemporary society, the practical application of academic pedagogical/educational knowledge is not the only challenge. Nowadays, nobody expects any more that teachers will strictly/rigorously apply the procedures based on the formal knowledge. Professional teacher knowledge is not only "formal", i.e. the one which is created by researchers for teachers. But the margin of tolerance of/acceptance for routine actions based on knowledge obtained only from practice is also quite small. More and more often, the emphasis is put on the creation of this knowledge, on the fact that the formation of educational knowledge cannot happen without the participation of school teachers, since the theory of education is not only the academics' domain. In a widespread shift, the concept of teachers as merely consumers of educational research is changing to one of teachers as producers and mediators of educational knowledge. The idea that teachers should also be researchers has become commonplace.

Analyzing the conditions for promoting knowledge creation, Hannele Niemi (2008) rightly states that teachers should have "opportunities to link teaching and learning together with the latest research dealing with the contents and methods of teaching. However, this requires a

new kid of co-operation with the academic community and the representatives of practitioners. It also requires the organizational support of higher education institutions to arrange platforms and models to join knowledge creation in pre- and in-service teacher education. Advancing co-operation and continuous learning among practitioners requires a high quality research community that contributes with internationally recognized research as well as communication and collaboration with practitioners and decision makers. Co-operation must not lower ambitious scientific aims but should enrich research design and methodologies."

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