A Collaborative Approach to the Professional Development of Head Teachers in the South Pacific

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Introduction

The imminent arrival of the primary teacher education programme at the Bachelor of Education level at the University of the South Pacific (U.S.P.) will change our perceptions of primary schooling in the South Pacific. Upon completion of the degree programme, the initial groups of graduates will be destined for promoted positions. Indeed, many intending inservice students may already hold such promoted positions in primary schools.

The BEd (Primary) degree's first intake of inservice students in 1999 will mainly be either Head Teachers or aspiring Head Teachers. This will pave the way for the Department of Education and Psychology at the U.S.P. to introduce an innovative, collaborative and culturally-sensitive approach to the professional development of Head Teachers.

The Department’s expansion into the field of primary education will begin in 1999. Venues will need to be established for the practical professional development of the programme's students. Implementation of this programme will necessitate the initiation of partnerships with individual primary schools.

Two characteristics of this inservice primary teaching practicum component of the BEd (Primary) programme will be different from the usual preservice version. Firstly, all participants enter an educational situation with professional knowledge and experience in primary education. Secondly, all participants have specialised professional knowledge and skills from which the other two groups can learn and then apply these. Therefore, using a collaborative strategy, all three groups should be able to focus their specialised knowledge, learning and wisdom to assist local teaching, learning and managing processes within the school.

From a Western Base to a South Pacific Base

The opportunity is present for the creation of genuine culturally appropriate professional partnerships between the teacher educators and the teachers in conjunction with the host primary schools. If structured appropriately, Western theories of education could be translated into South Pacific theories of education by the inclusion of Pacific-rooted notions of knowledge, learning and wisdom (Thaman, 1997, 122).

Restructuring the teaching practicum for these inservice students so that a problem-based approach to the primary milieu can be taken, will enable rewarding collaborative partnerships to form. It would be hoped that such a professionally positive outlook and its derived benefits will change the very nature of the western education model of the 'teaching practicum'. In short, the inservice primary teaching practicum will become a practical and local professional development situation for all.

A sound argument can be mounted for the use of a team approach to problem-based learning in relation to the teaching and learning process and school management. Concepts and techniques are changing to accommodate new situations at an alarming rate in most schools. So much so, that the practitioners' working knowledge and skills are becoming more and more grounded in the practical as well as the theoretical.

Thaman (1993, 2) gave some insight into this 'groundedness' when she stated that:

'We in the islands need to evolve innovative theories/models of development that are firmly rooted in a genuine attempt at a synthesis of traditional and modern knowledge, skills and values, because this is the context in which development occurs... This synthesis can only come about through appropriate education ... we ought to look for ways of developing ourselves and our resources that take our cultures into account'.

The practical world of our teachers, head teachers and teacher educators is one where
ambiguity often reigns. Problems and constraints are the usual factors for consideration rather than implementing western theoretical models. Enlisting the cooperation of colleagues and clients on tasks that expand as they are worked through is common. Self evaluation and peer evaluation are continuously occurring so that some sense of direction can be maintained. Flexibility and professional initiative function at the forefront in this ever changing culture of schooling.

A Strategic Leap

It is into this practical world that the Department of Education and Psychology at the U.S.P. would introduce its innovative and collaborative approach to the professional development of Head Teachers. Such an innovation is not the simple first order adaptation and extension of existing processes which maintain equilibrium and retain styles and strategies. It is the implementation of a completely different way of thinking and operating. It will require new second order learning for all three groups involved.

The learning envisaged is explained by Argyris and Schon (1978) in their theory of organisational learning. Simple first order learning is where members of the organisation respond to changes in the internal and external environments by modifying their activities while still maintaining the theories in use. Whereas in the case being discussed, second order learning involves going beyond people’s existing theories in use to review and restructure their way of working. A fundamental change takes place, which leads to new theories of action and major changes in the way the organisation functions in the future.

Each group will have to become aware and appreciative of the professional collegiality present. For the first time each group, in service students who are experienced and qualified teachers with advanced skills, existing teachers in schools and teacher educators, would come together to learn from the practical world of schooling. They will have to refocus their professional development as they learn and apply these different strategies. This in itself will require a new form of mind set learning.

An Action Learning Professional Development Strategy

One form of mind set learning which may be useful is an ‘action learning’ approach. Revans (1982) describes action learning as the development of self by the mutual support of equals. The technique includes a form of personal therapy whereby through reflection, discussion, decision making and action, participants are able to resolve problems in their organisation and develop a new mind set in so doing. The process involves forming action learning groups containing all three groups mentioned above. Each action learning group is facilitated by an adviser who would probably be the University teacher educator because the University is coordinating the in service teaching practicum. Each action learning group uses the resources of the group to work through and learn from typical primary school situations.

Revans (1982) states that ‘when four or five comrades in adversity are able to work closely together, not only upon each others’ problems in the me-here-and-now, but also upon their own inner and personal hang ups behind which their problems are obscured, they have less need of professional counselling than might be imagined, ... each may, in seeking to enrich and enlarge his own inner-subjective self, reciprocally help to enrich and enlarge the subjective selves of his fellows’.

Action learning groups with participating teacher educators as facilitators would act as catalysts for breaking down the western notion of the teaching practicum. Currently, a neophyte student learns how to teach from a practising associate teacher. The student is assessed by the associate teacher and a teacher educator who observes the neophyte student practising teaching skills on two separate occasions. The western teaching practicum model is concerned with transmitting western influenced professional knowledge and skills to the neophyte. The groups involved have varying levels of power and authority. Transmission is usually one way, going from the authority to the neophyte.

This western cultural scenario is vastly different from the more (Pacific) culturally-rooted version envisaged here. The collaborative partnership approach involves all local participants entering an educational situation with professional knowledge of their own cultural experiences in primary education. All participants will focus their specialised professional knowledge learning and wisdom on local teaching, learning and managing processes within the school. All three groups can learn from each other and apply their
learning together.

The actual process which would take place in these collaborative partnerships would be similar to how Garratt (1987) envisaged action learning groups operating. He states that ‘they are designed so that participants discuss observations, constructively criticize hypotheses, and give their support to their comrades in adversity, whilst action and reaction to their plans take place in the organisation’.

A Culturally Based Teaching Practicum

The strategy described by Garratt (1987) is very much like the proposed local cultural field-based approach to the inservice professional development of teachers. It takes learning closer to relevant real life situations. It develops practical competencies, problem-solving capabilities, leadership and a genuine local professional culture. It allows for reality decision-making and cooperative analysis and critical reflection of outcomes. Because of the diverse professional backgrounds of the people involved, the teaching profession is experienced as a local college of multi-disciplinary expert practitioners cooperatively searching for and implementing the best alternatives available for the education of children (Sachs, 1997, 51-52). Such an image maintains and even raises the professional status and cultural image of a South Pacific profession of teaching.

Another issue, that is effectively resolved by the collaborative partnerships approach to the BEd (Primary) inservice teaching practicum, is the sometimes uneasy attitude of schools towards accepting University students for teaching practice. Instead of the school giving a favour to the University by accepting the extra workload of supporting the education of these University students, all three groups will enter a professional relationship designed to deliver the most effective education possible to the children in the school (Sachs, 1997, 48). The mutual benefits of shared professional development come as a result of the cooperative focus on the teaching, learning and managing roles of the school.

Once the attitude and the accompanying skills for cooperative learning are established during the inservice practicum, the benefits of the model should encourage a flow-on to other areas within the school and the Department. An example of this flow-on from the collaborative approach to the development of the teaching and learning area, would be for the group to focus a problem solving strategy on the administration of the school. Quality management of schools is an influencing factor in quality teaching and learning. Both areas are closely related.

In any case, the BEd (Primary) would be catering for the professional development of key practising educators who would take up positions where they could directly influence the quality of education offered in schools in the region. Some of the graduates may take up positions in regional teachers’ colleges. Others will most likely take up leadership positions in primary schools throughout the region. Therefore such a flow-on would be entirely appropriate.

Culturally-Based Professional Development

All members of these collaborative action learning groups would benefit from applying their combined wisdom that is focused on the most recent developments, both in practice and in research that are occurring locally and globally. Because this wisdom is culturally-rooted, the quality of development should be too. The actual strategy of action learning is a professional development strategy. The cultural roots of local educators are renewed and invigorated. As all participants are professional development leaders, the cultural base of education offered in the South Pacific communities should be at least maintained if not strengthened.

Then, as Nabobo (1994, 44) would hope, local culturally-based wisdom might be pursued by teachers so that they can teach the present generation for the life ahead. A cultural wisdom is required for educational decision making that generates a cultural identity and in turn, a self-identity in the South Pacific.

Conclusion

Finally, the fact that this proposed form of professional development incorporates a problem resolution strategy for refining and improving various educational situations in local schools and applies the combined background experiences, knowledge, learning and wisdom of local people, it should ensure that the professional development outcomes remain relevant and sensitive to local priorities, values and ways. In this way, the Department is fulfilling the University Mission by helping to improve the quality of education.
offered in the South Pacific communities.

References


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