Abstract

The bulk of literature about education places enhancing teacher professionalism at the core of any educational improvement. In fact, researchers in the field of education have premised their arguments on the assumption that raising students' levels of performance necessitates promoting the professional growth of teachers. It is no wonder, then, that professional developers have designed and implemented numerous PD programs in an effort to bring about positive educational change and improvement. It is incontrovertibly true that the success of any professional development endeavor depends greatly on the willingness and readiness of the target participants, teachers.

Since most, if not all, professional development programs in the context where I work are "grounded in a disease model" (Clark, 1992: 79), almost all the teachers flinch at their mention and show great reluctance to get involved. I side with Diaz-Maggioli (2004) to admit that "the term 'professional development day' conjures only images of coffee breaks, consultants in elegant outfits, and schools barren of kids" (p. 1). This negative attitude towards professional development is caused by the assumption "that teachers need to be forced into developing [and that they] have deficits in knowledge and skill that can be fixed by training" (Clark, 1992: 79). Operating on this premise, professional developers find it compelling to adopt a technical-rational approach to professional development cramming teachers with external and ready-made solutions and ignoring their reflective practice.

In this research paper, I argue that professional development based on such a premise and such an approach would hardly yield any positive outcomes. Drawing on the work of Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983 and 1987), the notion of the teacher as a reflective practitioner will be

brought into the topic in an endeavor to encourage teachers to slot in reflection into their daily teaching practice. My belief is that by doing so, teachers will adopt a self-directed professional development approach that will get them easily involved in the process of lifelong learning.

Adopting a Reflective Approach to Teacher Professional Development

"The way of teaching demands a long journey that does not have any easily identifiable destination ... It is a journey that I believe must include a backward step into the self and it is a journey that is its own destination" (Tremmel, 1993: 456).

1. What is teacher professional development?

Teacher professional development is defined as a series of activities intended to "increase the skills, knowledge or understanding of teachers, and their effectiveness in schools" (DfES, 2001a, cited in Rhodes et al., 2004, p.2). It is an ongoing process that is nurtured over time by additional professional development inputs in order for teachers to renew and upgrade their skills and maintain a certain level of professionalism. Jackson (1992) calls for a distinction between teacher development and teacher change. He maintains that teachers undergo many changes throughout their careers. They grow more experienced and knowledgeable, gain wisdom, and may even attain excellence. According to him, these positive changes are desirable and thus qualify as professional development. On the other hand, teachers might lose interest in their job and develop "an increased sense of discouragement" (Jackson, 1992, p. 63). These negative changes are undesirable and do not qualify as development.

No one can question the value of professional learning "in creating effective educational organizations and raising the standards of learner achievement" (Rhodes et al., 2004, p. 2). This accounts for teachers' engagement with professional development activities either by necessity or desire. The former represents the top-down model in which teachers are required by their educational institutions to attend PD sessions. The latter, however, is individualized and teacher-initiated. Teachers take full responsibility for designing and engaging with their own professional development (Clark, 1992).

2. The traditional model of professional development

Unfortunately, teachers (at least in the context where I work) have outgrown an allergy to professional development. To quote Clark (1992), "the phrase 'professional development of teachers' carries a great deal of undertones" (p. 75). It is a process done *to* teachers, not *with*

them. Seldom have professional developers shown any consideration for addressing teachers' needs over the past few years. There has always been one prescribed formula in which professional development sessions are planned and implemented. These sessions are often based on "the identification of a topic for the 'in-service' session and the selection of the speaker" (Sparks, cited in Loucks-Horsley et al., 2003: ix). Accordingly, the effects of such sessions on teachers' teaching practices and their students' learning outcomes are hardly discernible. Diaz-Maggioli (2004) posits that professional development, as it has been known for years, "has yielded little or no positive effects on student learning" (p.1). In the context where I work, professional development has always operated on the premise that teachers lack the basic knowledge and required skills that would position them as academically efficient. This goes in line with Clark (1992) who criticizes the traditional model of professional development which holds "that teachers have deficits in knowledge and skill that can be fixed by training" (p. 75).

3. A shift towards the reflective practitioner approach

Over the last decades, professional development has moved away from the technical-rational approach – a behavioral approach to teacher education based on "a 'front-end loading' model in which professionals were taught knowledge and skills" (Foley, 1995: 5) by 'experts' in order for them to be effective – to the reflective practitioner approach – a constructivist approach to teacher education that places teachers at the centre of professional development programs and allows them "to build or construct their own knowledge base and their own professional skills" (Cheng et al., 2004 :86) through a process known as the critical reflective process. The reflective practitioner approach which is developed by Schön (1983 and 1987) has gained currency in the field of teacher professional development. Schön (1983) challenged the prevalent idea that professional practice depends primarily on the application of the scientific knowledge and that everyday problems can be solved simply by employing the principles and theories professionals have gained in the process of their formal professional education. Teachers are now seen as "reflective practitioners [who] build on their experiences and are actively engaged in developing theories that they can use in practice" (Gould & Baldwin, 2004: 102). The work of Schön is based on Dewey's (1933) notion of reflective thinking. The American educational theorist Dewey views "teachers as reflective practitioners, as professionals who could play very active roles in curriculum development and educational reforms" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996: 10). This

optimistic view of teachers has been overemphasized by Clark (1992) who reviewed research on teacher thinking to enhance "the enriched image of teachers as reflective professionals" (p. 75).

3.1 Reflection

Loughram, an educational theorist who draws heavily on the work of Dewey, defines reflection as "the deliberate and purposeful act of thinking which centres on ways of responding to problem situations" (Loughram, 1996: 14, cited in Leitch & Day, 2000: 180). Accordingly, reflection involves cognitive processes teachers use to sort out the problems they face in their day-to-day professional practice. Dewey (1993) makes a clear distinction between *routine action* and *reflective action*. According to him, routine action is a non-reflective action which is guided by traditions established within a school community as standard norms. Unreflective teachers never open themselves to new perspectives in an effort to experiment with other alternatives because they have been conditioned to think of those alternatives as options that really constitute awful risks; thus they have to be avoided at all costs. Reflective action, on the other hand, involves the "careful consideration of any belief or practice in light of the reasons that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996: 9). It is a move away from the dogmatic paradigm imposed by the technical-rational approach to professional development which neatly packages 'free-size' sets of techniques that suit all situations. It is through reflection, not practice, that teachers can look "at teaching differently, see[ing] it in a new light, [and] come[ing] to appreciate its complexity more than [they] have done as yet" (Jackson, 1992: 68). It is also through reflection, not practice, that teachers can develop greater commitment to action and gain agency and praxis. Rosner and her colleagues (1999) argue that "practice is unthinking action; praxis is reflective action. Slaves practice; masters praxis" (p. 259).

3.2 Setting a conceptual framework for reflection

Schön (1983) draws a distinction between two forms of reflective thinking: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. According to him, reflection-in-action refers to reflection in the midst of an action. It involves tacit thinking processes that are in constant interaction with ongoing practice. Such interaction would ultimately lead practitioners to modify their practice and refine it (Leitch & Day, 2000). As for reflection-on-action, it deals with the "systematic and deliberate thinking back over one's actions" (Russell & Munby, 1992: 3, cited in Leitch & Day,

2000: 180). This form of reflection usually takes place when the action has passed in an effort to gain a better understanding of the situation and improve our teaching practices. Keeping a reflective journal is a good way to get through the process of reflection-on-action. The core of the professional artistry is centered around these two forms of reflection with which reflective practitioners engage (Leitch & Day, 2000).

Louden (1992) maintains that "teachers *do* reflect on their practice" (p. 178). He firmly believes that reflection is best developed through fostering relationships between teachers and researchers. Expanding on the work of Habermas (1972) and Schön (1983 and 1987), he has developed a conceptual framework for reflection which comprises two dimensions – interests and forms – ending up in a matrix structure. Habermas rejects the idea that knowledge is the product of a 'pure' intellectual act. His theory of 'knowledge constitutive interests' is called as such because he strongly believes that knowledge "is always constituted on the basis of interests that have developed out of the natural needs of the human species" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 134). Habermas identified three types of knowledge constitutive interests: technical, practical, and emancipatory. *Technical interests* are grounded in the desire of human beings to retain a full control over certain variables for the sake of producing known outcomes. As teachers, we have some interests and needs that fall into this category. We need, by way of example, a huge repertoire of teaching skills, assessment and evaluation strategies, classroom management techniques, and a good knowledge of the curriculum. *Practical interests*, however, are grounded in the desire of human beings to understand the environment in which they live with the aim of effectively interacting with it (Grundy, 1987, cited in Atweh et al., 2001). Of course, teachers have several needs that fall into this category. They need to understand their students' beliefs, their social background, and the cultural context in which they operate so that they can be effective in their teaching. Louden (1992) subdivides the practical interest into two categories: the *personal* and the *problematic*. According to him, reflection with a personal interest relates to the humans' interest in connecting experience with their understanding of their own life. It involves the creation of narrative stories that account for the bibliographical connections which link their experiences to their actions and shape their sense of how they ought to act in the future (Louden, 1992). On the other hand, reflection with a problematic interest has the "resolution of the problems of professional action" (Louden, 1992: 184) as its main focus. It deals with "changing situations from a problematic to an improved state of affairs" (Elliot, 1993:197). The

third interest in Habermas's theory of 'knowledge constitutive interests' is the *emancipatory* interest. Louden refers to it as the *critical* interest. Unlike technical and practical interests which are connected to control and understanding respectively, emancipatory interest is closely connected to "autonomy and freedom from dogmatic dependence" (Atweh et al., 2001: 171). Worth noting is the fact that this type of knowledge greatly depends on the collaboration of people inside and outside the practice and cannot develop only through critical reflection (Atweh et al., 2001).

4. Professional development in my context

In the context where I work, almost all PD programs are devised and implemented to cater for the technical forms of teachers' knowledge. These programs adhere to the technical-rational approach to professional development, take the form of seminars, workshops, or conferences, and are based on the premise that teachers have deficiencies in their knowledge and skills. I will quote Clark (1992) to aver that they are "grounded in a disease model" (p. 79). They are often presented by outside 'experts' in an endeavor "to disseminate new knowledge or skills to teachers with the presenter being the expert who controls the content and organization of the workshops" (Hoban, 1997: 3). Sadly, no needs analysis is carried out prior to the implementation of any PD program to determine the professional needs of teachers, that is why professional development activities have most of the time been "a set of random, unrelated activities that have no clear direction or intent" (Guskey & Sparks, 2000: 17) and are rarely provided with follow-up support. Since most of these PD sessions have neither well-defined purposes nor worthwhile goals, their effects on teachers' academic performance and their students' learning outcomes are hardly recognizable. Besides, because these PD courses are tightly connected to perceived weaknesses in teachers' performance, participants' enthusiasm to be actively engaged tails off most of the time (Clark, 1992).

Regrettably, gearing teachers toward self-directed professional development seems a difficult task in my context given a number of factors. In the first place, most of the teachers in our context are expatriates. They have left their home countries in the hope of finding better job opportunities. Consequently, they are more interested in earning a living than looking for ways to enhance their professional growth. Pursuing this further, we can talk of no school-based professional development initiatives that would help teachers develop as professionals; hence

performing in professional isolation is a very common practice in almost all the schools across the UAE. Finally, the scheme of classification of teachers is hierarchical in nature. Teacher efficacy is based on the false assumption that teachers in the secondary cycle perform academically at a much higher level than teachers in the preparatory and elementary cycles. It is not at all surprising, then, that vertical collaboration across grade levels and hierarchies never takes place.

In an atmosphere where teachers are often portrayed and treated in a negative light and where professional development is centered around their deficits rather than their strengths, their own growth will be stagnated and their enthusiasm for reaching better performance levels dulls. Besides, when professional development is not tailored to meet the unique needs of teachers, it does very little to help them refine their teaching practices. What's more, when teachers are not encouraged to reflect on their personal practice to gain a better understanding of and deeper insights into the learning / teaching process, they will "only go through the motions" (Gabriel, 2005: 114) without having a real positive effect on their students' achievement.

Because of the 'disease model' on which professional development in my context is grounded, hardly will the implementation of any teacher professional development programme yield any positive outcomes. This is not to state that I am pessimistic about any academic improvement in the future, but it seems that we have lost the right way and thus found ourselves in a dark wood (Saltrick, 1998). What we need right now is "a path so that we can see where we're going. [A path that can] provide us with support… to pick us up when we stumble on the way" (Saltrick, 1998: 7). The path we should take is epitomized in two case studies provided in this unit of study: case study 6 and case study 9. Both cases studies represent examples of valuable teacher professional development whose effects on teacher effectiveness and student achievement are concrete and tangible. The main objective behind presenting these two case studies is for educational leaders to rethink and revitalize teacher professionalism and for teachers to effectively plan for their own professional growth.

5. Case Study Six

Case study 6 represents several Australian initiatives which have invigorating teacher professionalism and enhancing student learning outcomes at the core of their intention. Two of these initiatives are the National Schools Network (NSN) and the Innovative Links Project (ILP).

Central to both projects is a commitment to enhanced teacher professionalism and strategic restructuring of work organization.

5.1. The National Schools Network (NSN)

A set of principles binds the 200 networked schools together. This educational coalescence between schools is based on the premise that enhancing students' learning lives and promoting teachers' professional growth is possible through seeking external backup from and creating partnerships with educational organizations "engaged with similar change efforts" (Case Study 6). The NSN acknowledges the close relationship obtaining between students' academic performance and teachers' levels of competence. It operates under the assumption that work organization reforms should be undertaken if schools are to address the students' learning needs. The NSN conducts school-based action research as both an approach to professional development and an assessment tool to gauge the efficiency of the generated educational reforms. By adopting an action research model to professional development, the NSN pursues inquiries into the complex school-bred problems and tries to come up with their own resolutions. A key characteristic for the NSN is the week-long professional development workshops conducted by educational facilitators – a practicing teacher, a university colleague, or a teacher leader – whose role is to actively engage all the participants while "maintaining the integrity of the program" (Case Study 6). The workshops have given rise to a number of principles that can be summed up as follows:

- Stressing the importance of teacher collegiality and collaboration in building effective learning communities.
- Encouraging reflective practice by providing adequate time to improve teacher effectiveness and raise the students' overall performance levels.
- Designing engaging workshop activities that guarantee the active involvement of all participants.
- Relating workshop professional knowledge to the participants' own context of work and actual classroom situations.

5.2.The Innovative Links Project (ILP)

Building upon the experience of the National Schools Network, the Innovative Links Project is "an example of a nationwide initiative that challenges established conceptions as to what schooling, teacher professionalism, and teacher education are about" (Day, 2000: 82). The approach to teacher professionalism adopted by the ILP is an action research-based one, designed to provide teachers working within the professional community of the school with real professional development opportunities (Case Study 6). Central to the Innovative Links Project is a commitment to deeply explore the relationship existing between theory and practice in teacher education to ultimately bring them as close together as possible. To adhere to this commitment, schools and universities have entered into partnerships through the formation of "local roundtables comprising five to six schools and academic associates from the affiliated university" (Ibid, 2000: 82). At the core of this partnership formation is the intention to create a professional learning community which would enable teachers as well as students to actively engage in the process of lifelong learning.

5.3.NSN and ILP: Rethinking teacher professionalism

Both the National Schools Network and the Innovative Links Project represent educational initiatives towards rethinking teacher professionalism. These initiatives are not "grounded in a disease model" (Clark, 1992: 79), but rather built on a 'health' model in which teachers are seen in a positive light. They are viewed as reflective professionals who are able to "think aloud, describe their thoughts and decision processes, and make the invisible aspects of teaching visible" (Ibid, 1992: 75). As a result, teachers have been given the responsibility for designing and implementing their own professional development programs which are tailored not only to meet their specific professional needs but also to address the students' ongoing learning needs.

Admittedly, teacher collaboration has been a key feature to the success of both projects. Beattie (1995) maintains that "collaboration, collegiality and conversations provide teachers with a means for professional learning and development within the context of self and community" (cited in Day, 2000: 84). Although the participants involved in the collaborative process belong to different educational contexts, collaboration between them adheres to the horizontal type. This type of collaboration necessitates that professional expertise be shared. The teachers involved

have created positive collegial contexts where they "work together, bonded by similar compelling visions and commitments" (Raymond et al., 1992:154), and "collaborate in solving common problems in a focused way" (Ibid, 1992: 155). They have organized themselves into professional groups and adopted participatory action research as a core value and a vehicle to enhance their professional growth. The application of the action research model has enabled teachers to "see themselves as active agents in their own professional worlds" (Day, 2000: 84). Worth mentioning is the fact that both projects would not have been that successful if they had not been focused on reflective practice, which is enhanced through collaboration (Louden 1992). The various participants – school-based teachers and university-based colleagues – have engaged in journal writing as both a way of engaging in critical self-reflection and documenting professional practice and its outcomes (ILP, 1996).

Unfortunately, no such educational project has taken place in the context where I work. Actually, we cannot talk of any vertical collaboration between educational institutions. A couple of years ago, we attended a series of workshops designed and implemented by one of the universities in the area. Regrettably, this PD program did not yield any positive outcomes for it was not tailored to meet the teachers' specific learning needs. For many of the teachers, it was just an occasion to take half a day off from school.

6. Case Study Nine

Case study 9 is of paramount importance in the sense that it provides two examples of good practice teachers need to embrace to qualify as reflective practitioners. These are working with a critical friend and keeping a reflective journal. While the former entails that teachers need to summon their courage to open up their teaching for their colleagues to observe and scrutinize, the latter entails that teachers display their teaching on paper for self-examination. In either case, teachers need to stand back to gain a new perspective on their own teaching practices.

6.1. Working with a critical friend

Working with a critical friend is the key facet of reflective practice. It is an important step towards building a collaborative culture in which mutual professional support prevails. When teachers get through the critical friends process, professional isolation is kept to a minimum and 'double loop learning' (Argyris and Schön, 1978) reaches its peak. Day (1999) argues that

"active encouragement of critical friendships" will eventually lead to "deeper levels of reflection, experimentation, and greater potential for change and higher teaching standards (p. 101). The term 'critical' in this sense does not carry negative undertones because the role of a critical friend in this case does not adhere to the vertical / hierarchical structure. The role of a critical friend here is critical in a constructive manner. It reflects the supportive nature of the relationship of the two partners engaging in the critical friends process.

One of the advantages of working with a critical friend is that it fosters the process of engaging with self-initiated professional development and promotes a culture of self-direct and lifelong learning for teachers. Undoubtedly, establishing a critical friendship with the person we feel most comfortable with will yield positive learning outcomes. When teachers choose to embark on a learning program, it is necessary that they work in an environment of trust and mutual respect since the whole process of working with a critical friend necessitates the disclosure of their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, hopes, and fears.

Another advantage of working with a critical friend is that it facilitates the process of 'double loop learning'. A critical friend has the potential of moving us beyond improved performance – "reflection with a technical interest" (Louden, 1992: 181) – which is intended to meet established objectives (single-loop learning) to new ways of "working and discovering, inventing, and producing new options, objectives, perceptions, assumptions, and ways of approaching problems" (double-loop learning) (Klatt, 1999: 74). The work of Louden (1992) with Johanna, "a teacher at an alternative middle school" (p. 179), reflects the whole process of working with a critical friend. It is a facilitative, supportive, and reflective learning process that enables teachers to make sense of their work and function properly in their classrooms and school context.

I have had some opportunities to work with critical friends throughout my fifteen-rear career. Last year, by way of example, I devised an intervention learning plan to enhance my students' writing performance. It was also a self-initiated action I took to enhance my professional growth. I was lucky enough to have a dedicated colleague who showed great willingness in assisting me in implementing my professional plan. We used to sit together after every lesson to assess our progress and plan for the coming stage. The constructive feedback he provided me with enabled me to refine many of my teaching practices. I have to admit that the

whole process of working with him was really beneficial in terms of the professional experience both of us have gained.

6.2. Keeping a reflective journal

The main reason behind keeping a reflective journal is premised on the idea that writing is a form of reflection, and that reflection on practice is a 'healthy' professional habit that promotes meaningful learning and enhances teacher effectiveness. Holly (1997) posits that keeping a journal enables teachers to discover 'hidden' facets of their teaching. This discovery would ultimately lead them to inform their teaching practices. In fact, Holly's views are in agreement with Clark's (1992) who encourages teachers to write their own credos of teaching so that their implicit theories can be made more explicit and visible.

In a teaching journal, teachers engage in writing about their teaching experiences over a period of time in an endeavor to analyze the patterns and insights into their teaching practices. For teachers to meet the intended objectives behind keeping a reflective journal, this latter needs to be examined and analyzed from time to time for recurring patterns of events. Failure to do so would certainly render it ineffective (Farrell, 2004).

I have developed the habit of keeping a reflective journal since last year, yet I do not write on a daily basis. In the near past, I used to reflect mentally. Later, I realized that mental reflection has many shortcomings since it can neither be explored nor analyzed over time. In my own context, most teachers do not keep a reflective journal. It is probably because they consider that writing about their practices will add extra obligations to their teaching load. Not until we sensitize them to the real value of keeping a reflective journal will they be motivated to keep one.

Conclusion

In conclusion, research on teacher thinking portrays teachers as reflective professionals who "have become researchers on their own teaching effectiveness" (Clark, 1992: 76). Accordingly, adherence to the technical-rational approach by applying professional knowledge gained at workshops in practical situations would not yield positive outcomes given the fact that it does not take into account the reflective practice of teachers. Schon (1983) maintains that reflection is a process through which teachers become aware of their tacit knowledge and informal theories. Making the implicit explicit is an important step towards improved and refined

practice. Gaining insight into our informal theories will enable us to "modify and expand on them through reading, discussion and further reflection" (Foley, 1995: 10).

The two case studies presented earlier shed light on the notion of practitioner-as-researcher. Teachers adopt an action research model to explore and analyze their teaching practices. This approach is "meaningful and relevant to classroom practice than that which was carried out by outside researchers or academics" (Verma & Mallick, 1999:182). By applying this inquiry-based approach, teachers can gain full control of their own professional development.

Since "educational improvement will only come about as teachers develop professionally" (Holly, 1997: 20), educational leaders in my context should shape a teacher education path for teachers by investing in school-based professional development programs. If well-designed and tailored to students and teachers' learning needs, such programs will certainly lead to educational improvement because they are closely linked to practice in specific school contexts.

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