Textbook Addiction Treatment: A Move towards Teacher and Student Autonomy

Abstract

It is known for a fact that textbooks are widely used in today's classrooms. Admittedly, textbooks may have some advantages in the sense that they provide the framework for any educational course. However, exclusively depending on them may restrict both teacher and student autonomy. Textbooks have been criticized for promoting rote instead of reflective learning and short instead of long memory. Chambliss and Calfee (1998) posit that instead of tossing textbooks, we should work on improving them by providing extra instructional support that would make up for their shortcomings. Although their suggestion seems to be a good one, improving textbooks may take the form of simply creating activities that literally duplicate the activities presented in them.

In this research paper, I labor under the assumption that relying solely on textbooks in our classroom instruction will lead our students to lose all interest in learning. I will propose a professional development program that draws heavily form Schon's (1983) reflective practitioner approach to address the issue of what I call textbook addiction and suggest ways on how to increase teacher and learner autonomy.

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1. Background and Context of the Study

At the end of each academic term, students at my school walk out of the exam room and throw their textbooks around in the school yard. My primary purpose in stating this standard practice is not to decry this crass behavior, but rather to go deeper into the causes that have led our students to pick up such a bad habit. Let us face it bravely; throwing away textbooks and other learning materials as soon as exams are over is a precursor of failure not only in our schools but also in our educational system as a whole. I am not trying to make a mountain out of a molehill. On the contrary, by bringing the students' irresponsible behavior to the notice, I intend to attempt an explanation and seek practical solutions to help our students depart from this undesirable practice.

To put the issue into perspective, tossing textbooks and classroom notes is synonymous with leaving all the acquired learning behind school walls. Unquestionably, the objective of any education is to help students obtain lifelong learning skills that would prepare them for the world outside of school. However, our students' practice suggests that we, educators and educational institutions, have not been successful in creating a lifelong learning environment that inspires our students to take education at face value. The learning we have constructed has unfortunately proven short lived since it does not go beyond the school walls. The act of throwing away textbooks and other learning materials at the end of each term is suggestive of a problem that needs immediate intervention to be cleared up.

2. Data Analysis

Since the problem has a recurring nature, I have adopted an inquiry-based approach to investigate the matter fully and carefully. I have constructed a questionnaire and administered it to 25 teachers of different subject areas. Giving credence to the view that holds "kids as experts" (Clark, 1992: 82), I have also conducted informal interviews with some of the students during break times. The main reason behind collecting such data is for me to gain some insight into the students' end-of-term behavior and design a professional development program on the basis of a 'clinical' diagnosis.

2.1.Teacher Questionnaire

Part I of the questionnaire attempts to make an illuminative evaluation of textbooks now implemented in Model High Schools, and part II aims to examine the instructional support provided by the teachers. Both questions 1 and 2 of the questionnaire sought to investigate how much the textbooks meet the teachers and students' expectations. The big majority of the teachers who filled in the questionnaire think that the textbooks neither meet their expectations (Fig. 1) nor their students' (Fig. 2). Below are two charts that illustrate the teachers' perceptions about the textbooks currently in use.
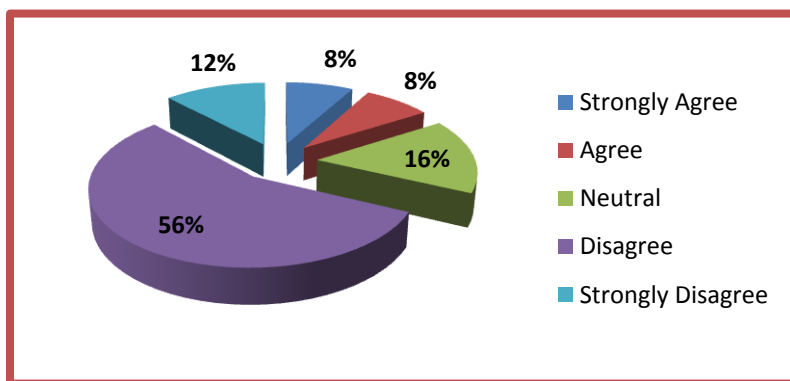
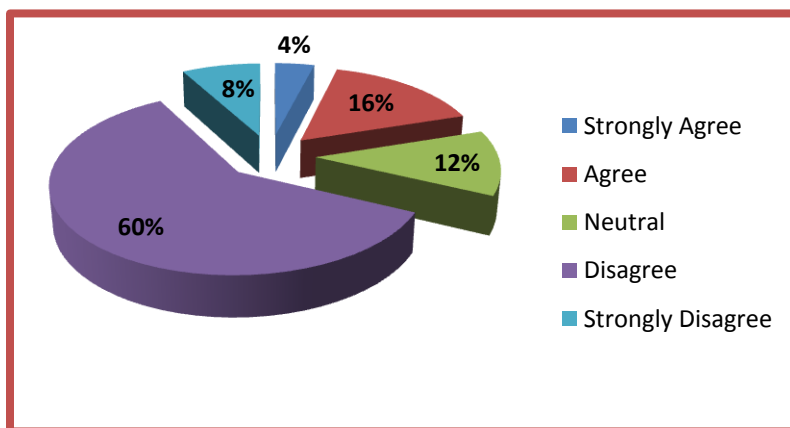**Figure 1: Textbooks meet the teachers' expectations**

Figure 2: Textbooks meet the students' expectations

Question 3 in the questionnaire meant to investigate the shortcomings of the textbooks in all subject areas. 20 out of 25 teachers (80%) held that the textbooks encourage rote learning, and (56%) maintained that they do not teach high-order thinking skills. Backing up this claim, (68%) of the teachers agreed with the statement that textbooks provide enough practice for the students, (60%) reported that recycling and reinforcement are reflected in all sections, and (64%) concurred that they include some assessment tools. Most of the teachers (76%) indicated that the

content displayed in the textbooks is too narrow to address their students' learning needs. However; (60%) stated that the textbook activities are appealing to the students.
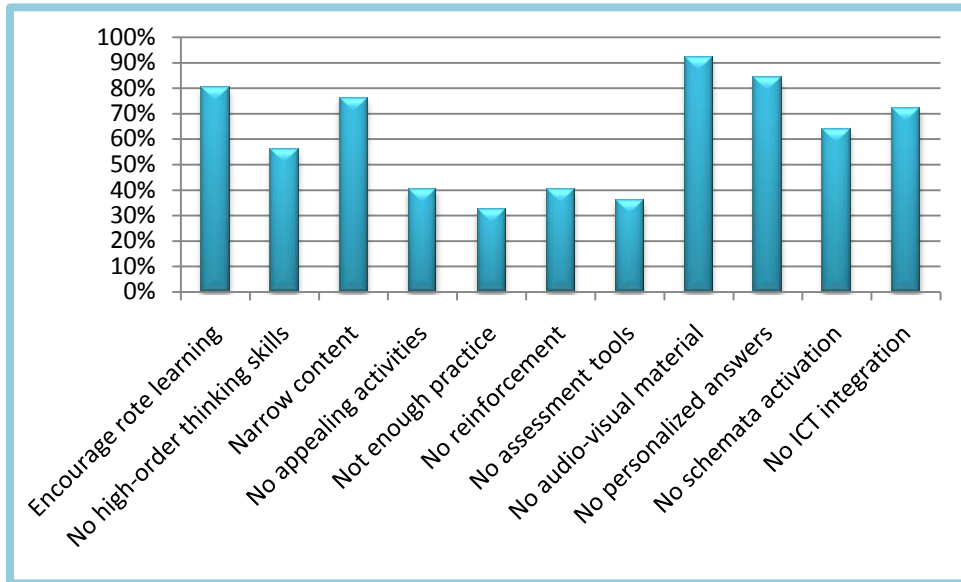

Figure 3: Shortcomings of the textbooks implemented

Part II of the questionnaire sought to investigate how much instructional support is provided by the teachers. (72%) of the teachers depend heavily on the textbook. This is probably why only (16%) affirmed that they always design their own activities. Below is a chart that recapitulates the frequency of designing learning activities.

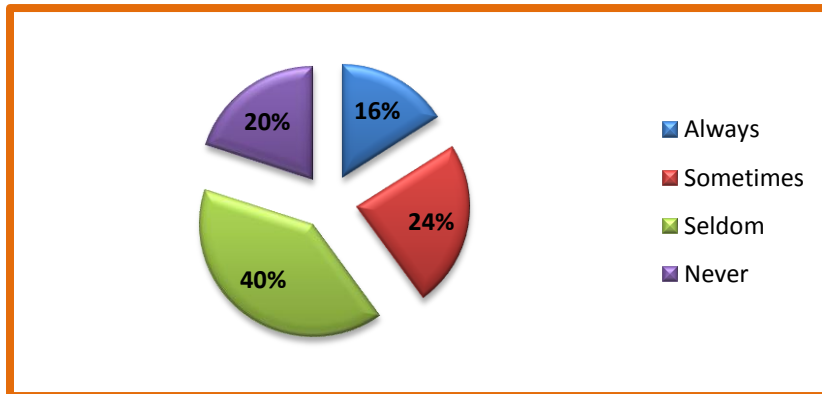Figure 4: Frequency of supplementary activities

It is worth noting that (76%) of the activities devised by teachers are geared to the textbook. Although our school has an excellent ICT infrastructure, only (8%) of the teachers reported that they always incorporate ICT into their daily classroom instruction. The chart below shows the frequency of ICT integration into teachers' pedagogic practices.
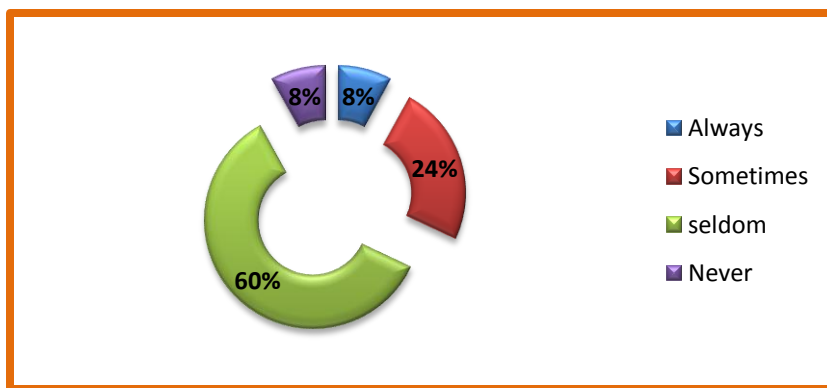
Figure 5: ICT Integration into Teachers' Pedagogic Practices

Statement (5) in Part II of the questionnaire reveals that (88%) of the teachers have no classroom libraries. This indisputably accounts for the fact that teachers depend exclusively on the textbooks. Statement (6) of the questionnaire sought to investigate the frequency with which students engage in classroom projects and creative work. Only (8%) of the teachers stated that they ask their students to conduct research on topics pertaining to the themes they study. The table below demonstrates the frequency of conducting classroom projects.

	Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Series1	8%	20%	32	40%
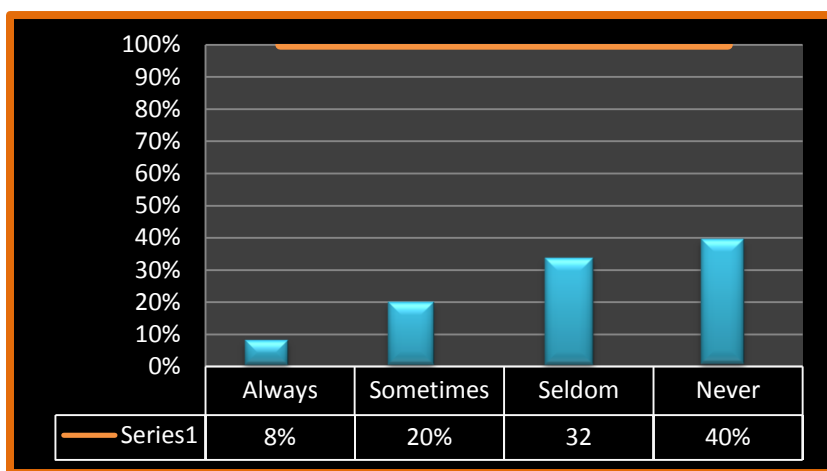
Figure 6: Conducting Classroom Projects

2.2. Conversational Interviews With teachers

By informally interviewing teachers, my primary concern was to gain insight into their teaching practices and examine how much these practices relate to their students' interest. I conducted the interviews during breakfast recess periods in the teachers' social club. The informal nature of the interviews set the teachers being interviewed at ease. The open-ended nature of the questions I asked allowed me to get as much feedback as possible. Among these questions: (1) Why do you think students in your context do not value learning? (2) What

teaching strategies do you implement in your classroom? (3) How much can you do to help your students enjoy the learning experience?

As a general rule, teachers always lay all the blame on their students' lack of motivation, the curriculum that does not address their students' learning needs, and the home and surrounding influence. A good number of teachers related their students' lack of motivation to economic factors. The UAE is a nouveau-riche country and its people are well-off. "How can you expect a student who comes in a luxurious car to be motivated?" wondered one of the teachers. Other teachers, however, attribute their students' indifference towards learning to the fact that they have private tutors at home, thus school for them represents no more than a wonderful place to socialize and have fun.

Because students have to sit for a standardized test prepared by Abu Dhabi Educational Zone (ADEZ) at the end of each term, teachers adhere to an exam-oriented teaching style. It is no wonder, then, that they literally follow the textbook page by page and that curriculum coverage is given top priority. Some teachers reported that a few students sometimes fell asleep during instruction. When I asked them about what they thought the causes were, they ascribed sleeping to lack of motivation and concern. Teachers' responses to how much they can make the learning experience enjoyable were not heartening. There was unanimity among them that motivation is unlikely to be enhanced because students do not have the passion for learning. It is worth noting that nothing concerning intrinsic motivation was mentioned.

I have also learnt from the teachers I interviewed that they perform in professional isolation. Hardly can we talk about cross-grade or grade-level teacher collaboration. When I asked for the reasons, teachers responded that they had no time to foster teamwork and collegiality. They added that such a practice would increase their already heavy workload.

2.3. Conversational interviews with Students

By informally interviewing students, I gained some insights into the causes of their carelessness and irresponsible behavior. Almost all of the students maintained that learning had never been an enjoyable experience, but rather a punishment inflicted on them. Schools, according to them, fill them with negative emotions such as boredom and monotony. They attribute boredom and lack of enthusiasm for learning to their teachers' poor techniques that have always put them off their lessons (Ebong, 2004). The textbook-oriented approach to teaching prevents them any

opportunity to get involved in the lesson-making process. "The classroom is a place where we have to sit passively listening to the teacher who does most of the talking to cram our heads with useless information. His main concern is to finish the textbook," commented one of the students. According to most of the students, the end of term marks the end to their 'imprisonment'. Throwing away textbooks and other learning materials is a way of venting their frustration, a way of saying goodbye to the boring experience, and a way of leaving all the learning behind school walls.

3. Discussion

The data gathered by means of a teacher questionnaire and conversational interviews with both teachers and students suggest that there are many problems stifling the teaching-learning process in our school. In the first place, we have teachers who depend exclusively on the textbook. When teachers rely entirely on one source – the textbook in our case –, it simply means that they ignore the potential of other learning sources. I would argue that "there is more to teaching than meets the eye" (Clark, 1992: 78). "Textbooks are not the curriculum" (Glatthorn & Jailall, 2008: 57). They are only one source among many other sources. In a textbook-driven curriculum, however, the textbook is "the engine that drives the curriculum" (Glynn & Muth, 1994: 1062, cited in Abell & Lederman, 2007: 459). Admittedly, the textbook-oriented approach to teaching encourages rote learning, thus stifling any attempt to enhance critical thinking. Tomlinson and her colleagues (2001) argue that "text activities only call[ed] for the cognitive processes of recall and paraphrasing on the part of the students" (p.76). Also, the more dependent on the textbook teachers are, the less autonomy, thinking, and creativity they have.

The methodology of feeding students large amounts of information has been thrown into question because such a methodology requires students to regurgitate what has been learnt in class and then 'spit' it out on an examination (Ulrich & Glendon, 2005). This old instructional paradigm places the teacher at the center of the teaching-learning process and prevents the students any opportunity to actively engage in the learning process. Students in this paradigm are viewed as passive recipients of the knowledge poured into them by the teacher; therefore, they "adopt an extremely passive approach to learning" (Braine, 2005: 39). Most classes are perceived by the students as dry and boring because subjects are learnt "for instrumental purposes, chiefly to pass examinations" (Ibid, 2005: 39). In any exam-oriented culture, what has

been learnt is short lived and is not likely to be valued by students for the mere reason that it serves a unique purpose only: passing an examination. In order for our students to embrace lifelong learning and in order for the acquired learning to transcend the school walls, real-life learning goals should be embedded into the curriculum (Ferguson et al., 2001). Jacques (2000) posits that learning

> … entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom (p. 215).

Although teachers acknowledge many shortcomings of the textbooks, they show some reluctance to design their own learning activities. These activities, when student-centered and challenging enough, are of paramount importance given the fact that the textbooks now implemented do not require students to use their critical thinking skills. Our role as educators, then, is to set up problem-solving situations where students are actively engaged and challenged to make use of their abilities in an attempt to demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter (Dorn et al., 2003). We should not design handouts and worksheets that literally duplicate the textbook for this will compound the students' lack of interest. Besides, we should recognize the benefits of other learning resources and incorporate them in our daily instruction. Computers, the Internet, classroom libraries, videos and the like are powerful educational tools that have great potential. These tools should be exploited to the outmost if we are to bring about innovation to our teaching practices. Unless we try our best to be innovative, there is little likelihood that our students' interest in embracing lifelong learning will be sparked.

4. The Need for Intervention: Designing a Professional Development Program

The professional development program I propose draws heavily from Schön's (1983 and 1987) reflective practitioner approach which is premised on the idea that "practitioners are essentially self-educated via the pursuit of their ongoing practices and reflection upon them" (Russell & Munby, 1992:164). The program is also informed by research on teacher thinking which portrays teachers as active, wise, and knowledgeable, and can consequently take responsibility for their own professional development (Clark, 1992). I work under the assumption that "the application of best instructional practices is a key to enhancing student performance" (Wilmore, 2004:53). Therefore; the project aims at offering effective

interventional strategies that would help teachers collaborate together in an attempt to change their current methods of teaching and import new practices into their classrooms (Woodward & Cuban, 2000).

4.1. Phases of the Professional Development Program

The program is designed to overcome some of the problems that might cause our students to lose interest in learning. The answers to the following focal question would form the basis for the school-based intervention program: How can we move from lecture to discussion, from textbook-oriented teaching to inquiry-based learning, and from a teacher-driven curriculum to a student-driven curriculum?

4.1.1. Phase I: Subject-Area and Grade-Level Organization

The first step would be holding a meeting with the teaching staff to sensitize them to the seriousness of the problem. I will present the data gathered by means of the questionnaire, teacher interviews, and student interviews. Teachers will then reflect on what to do to help our students overcome these problems and enjoy the learning experience. I will start by capitalizing on teachers' strengths rather than their weaknesses. I will ask them to list the things they can do well and are proud of in their teaching practices (Clark, 1992). This process of involving teachers in the professional development program and giving them opportunities to contribute their suggestions is of paramount importance in the sense that it creates "a sense of belonging and shared professional learning among colleagues" (Rosemary et al., 2007 :75).

After listing all the suggestions, teachers form subject-area groups. Then, teachers in the same subject-area group divide into grade-level groups. Next, they choose a grade-level team leader whose role is mainly to guide the teachers through the reflective inquiry process, provide them with the necessary support, and "document incremental progress toward overall program goals" (Guskey, 2000: 239). As a preliminary step, teachers within each grade-level group set up a schedule for their meetings. These meetings should be held once every other week. For instance, the first weekly meeting will be devoted to lesson design, and the second weekly meeting will be devoted to lesson delivery. This will not add to the teachers' workload since the teachers' schedule is built on 18 periods, of which two consecutive periods are devoted to staff meetings.

4.1.2. Phase II: Lesson Design

Before teachers engage with the planning phase, I need to explain to them that we will adopt an action research approach as a way of tailoring our instructional practices to meet our students' needs. As described by Carr and Kemmis (1986), action research is a "self-reflective spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (p. 162, cited in Wallace & Louden, 2000: 115). In this phase, teachers will draw upon their experience to develop an action plan to try out. The action plan developed at this stage should not be adhered to rigidly for it is liable to future modifications.
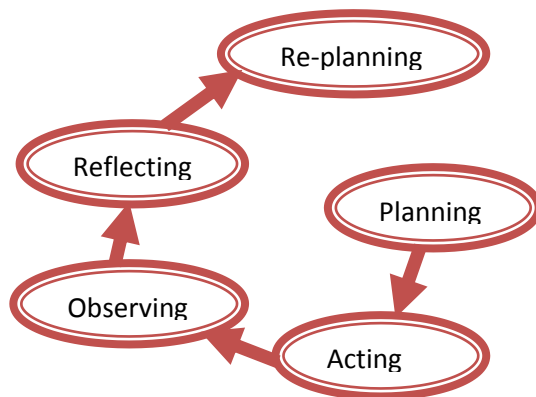
Figure 7: Action Research Reflective Cycle

Operating on the premise that a textbook cannot address the individual learning needs of every student and that it keeps the teacher's autonomy to a minimum, "teachers need to bring topics alive by using materials that fit their students, their methods, and their own personality" (Spreyer, 2002: 8). This does not mean that teachers have to put textbooks aside while planning their lessons. On the contrary, the textbook will be used as the backbone of the curriculum. It will provide the framework for the subject matter. Adopting an action research reflective cycle, teachers will plan their lessons for a whole week. They will need to decide on how best to incorporate a variety of resources into their teaching in an effort to grab the students' attention and spur their motivation. They will also need to decide on the best instructional strategies for delivery and think of possible ways of skillfully varying them with the nature of the learning tasks and learners' needs (Berliner, 1986 cited in Tomlinson, 1999).

Teachers should be skilful at designed learning activities intended to enhance student autonomy. These activities should be challenging enough and require students to use their prior knowledge and apply a set of problem-solving skills to accomplish any task. This is the only way

to get our students away from rote learning and help them embrace lifelong learning. Sagor and Cox (2004) posit that

> Mastery learning proponents see "knowing" as a commodity that can be passed from teacher to learner while constructivists believe that knowing is an inherently individual process that cannot be transmitted, but, must be constructed by the learner him/herself (p. 73-4).

4.1.3. Phase III: Lesson Delivery

To grab their students' attention and to get them actively engaged in the learning process, teachers need to "transform their classrooms into effective laboratories for learning" (Sullivan & Glanz, 2004:41). They also need to employ a wide range of instructional strategies and delivery techniques including "cooperative and mastery learning, class debates, panel discussions, student presentations, journals and writing logs, and inter-disciplinary and inquiry-based instruction" (Ibid: 41). Students should feel that there is a big change in the classroom environment. When teachers use a broad spectrum of resources and "present information from various perspectives and thorough different media" (Ibid: 41), student will realize that neither the teacher nor the textbook is the only source of information. This will enable them to grow less dependent on both the teacher and the textbook and will certainly enhance their autonomy.

4.1.4. Phase IV: Reflection

Some of the lessons will be video-taped and examined during grade-level meetings. This is an effective way to model Schön's (1983) reflection-on-action. The process of reflecting on their tacit practical knowledge rather than applying theoretical knowledge generated by outside experts will enable teachers to grow professionally (Carr, 1989). Teachers will be encouraged to use Louden's (1992) framework for reflection to gain a better understanding of the students' negative attitudes towards learning. It is through collaborative reflection, which is enabled by the creation of a network of professional collegiality, that teachers will adjust their current teaching practices to better address the various needs of their students.

4.1.5. Phase V: Evaluation

Ideally, good organization, effective planning, collaborative work, and efficient management are keys to the success of any educational program. However, success is not

something that can easily be achieved. It requires time, commitment, and the support of others. What I shall expect in the early stages of the program implementation is not resounding success, but rather symptoms of success. It is vital to determine how well the professional development program will work for both the students and the teachers. To achieve this goal, an evaluation committee should be established to gauge the success of the professional program. Receiving feedback by means of surveys completed by participants – teachers, students, administrators, and parents – will help us gain insights into the program's effectiveness and enlighten us as to the improvements needed for its success.

4.2. Factors of success

Admittedly, there are several enabling factors that will contribute to the success of my professional development program.

4.2.1. Acceptance

Sims and Sims (2004) maintain that "individual and group behavior following an organizational change can take many forms, ranging from extremes of acceptance to active resistance" (p. 191). Central to the success of the professional development program I have devised is the administration, school staff, and student acceptance of the program. If all stakeholders are fully aware of the program's potential for bringing about positive institutional change, they will cooperate to make of it a success. They should share the belief that the program is in everybody's interest. Acceptance should not be restricted to stakeholders within the school community alone, but should also permeate to include educational leaders and policy-makers.

4.2.2. Budget

Pinkerton holds that "the budget is the heart and soul of a project" (p. 124). A good budget should be allocated to purchase books and other educational recourses, install a good ICT infrastructure, and hire experts to deliver workshops if need be. Investing in education simply means investing in posterity. Since today's students will be tomorrow's leaders, we should spare no effort or expense to provide them with a valuable education that enables them to serve their country.

4.2.3. Continuous and sustained support

The success of any professional development program depends greatly on how much support is provided. Apart from financial support, moral support can also play an important role in the success of the program. This could take the form of "verbally praising teachers' accomplishments and publishing their achievements in school publications and the local media" (National Science Resource Center, 1997: 78). Support should also come from the students' parents. Parents should attend all parent meetings to have a clear idea about how well their children are doing at school and do the necessary follow up at home.

4.2.4. Partnership with local universities

Striking a partnership between schools and universities is vital to the renewal of teacher professionalism and may yield positive outcomes (Hartley & Whitehead, 2005). The Innovative Links Project demonstrates how the relationship between schoolteachers and university-based academics could be developed to promote teacher professional development. Educational leaders can play a major role in setting up such a partnership.

Conclusion

It is high time we realized that we, as educators, need to change the existing patterns of work organizations if we want our schools to turn into learning organizations that promote teachers' reflection and collaboration (Hollingsworth, 1997). It is always easy to blame students for their failure, to blame the textbook, or even to blame the educational system, but it is not easy to blame ourselves who have contributed to this failure. This brings to mind the English proverb that goes "a poor craftsman always blames his tools". In an effort to be a good craftsman who never blames his tools, we "should be committed to becoming better teachers, and the first step in that direction is reflecting on what we do and how we do it" (Gabriel, 2005: 114).

The main objective behind the professional development program I propose is not to help our students score high on all tests, but rather to help them "become lifelong learners who love books and discovery and who see learning and school as an exciting adventure" (Glanz & Sullivan, 2000: 106). This objective can be easily achieved if teachers desist from performing in professional isolation and form a professional learning community, with reflective practice at its

core. It is through reflection that teachers can refine their practices which will have a direct impact on their students' achievement.

Since the professional development program I have come up with clearly states a problem and perceives a need related to our students' learning (Barth, 1991; Fullan, 1993, cited in Barell, 2003: 216), I am every hope that it will achieve acceptance by all stakeholders and eventually reach success.

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