1994

Partnership : Beyond Consultation

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Recommended Citation
http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1994v19n1.3
Teachers as Learners:

Most teachers in today's classrooms can describe a lifetime of reforms, one stacked on the other, few, if any, appearing to have any consequence for their professional lives. In more recent times, a multiplicity of reforms has been generated from outside the school, steeped in managerialism, benefit of structures which allow teacher discourse, and only distantly related to the purposes of schools - teaching and learning. The attitude of the profession to change has been shaped by the sheer, cumulative impact of multiple, complex and non-negotiable reforms. What constrains teachers time, their energy, their motivation, their development days are a mockery compared with the resources required for the re-orientation of teachers and administrators' responsibilities that serious restructuring requires. (p.5)

Many reform policies focus on removing or buffering constraints to effective practice, that is, inadequately managed resources, lack of appropriate teacher preparation, or insufficient teacher voice in curriculum decisions. However, an important lesson of the past decade is that removing constraints or obstacles does not by itself ensure more effective practice. Other and often different factors are required to enable practice. In addition the factors that enable practice - productive collegial relations, organisational structures that promote open communication and feedback and leadership that 'manages' opportunities for professional growth and nurtures norms of individual development, for example - are not amenable to direct policy fixes because they do not operate singly or consistently across settings. (p.4)

What is required is a change in the culture of our profession. We know that change will be a constant in the wider world but also in our professional lives. When we close our classroom doors on the world outside we are stating, in effect, that we as professionals can segment ourselves from the rest of society. For a while, perhaps we can, but the pressure will mount until outsiders demand another burst of restructuring.

Holt High School, and the many schools in the National Schools Project, have decided to be proactive, and take control rather than wait for school improvement by central formulae. To follow this route requires teachers to assume responsibility for their own learning. Schools must become sites for such learning, places where current orthodoxies are questioned, intelligent modifications to work organisation and pedagogy are trialled, and the net benefit of those modifications assessed by the people who initiated them and who must live with the consequences. For this to happen research and development must become an essential work practice for teachers.

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specifically upon the National Schools Project as it has been evolving in New South Wales. The partnership features can be seen to fall into three coalescence: the relationship between employers and unions; the relationship between the National Schools Project, the schools and the academic reference group; and, the relationships between members of the school community.

Requirements for Soundly Based Educational Partnerships

Before turning to current reforms in professional development it is worth considering further the nature of educational partnerships which are truly educative in their function. What do they require? First and foremost is the matter of reciprocity.

Reciprocity is a metaphor, derived from mathematics, which clarifies the paradox of the whole. In spite of a recognition of the divisibility of the whole there is also a converse understanding that the elements, when combined, make for a unity. So that a partnership, which may involve several players, can only be reciprocal if the endeavours of each partner interact to produce an enterprise which is itself seamless (West, Idol & Cannon, 1989). The National Schools Project, which is founded upon reciprocal partnership arrangements, has been a shared and purposeful endeavour. Just as the weavers and designers work together to produce a cloth of which they are both a part so too have the partners had a common goal in restructuring teachers’ work which is designed to produce conditions that will make learning better for the consequential stakeholders in all of this, the students in our schools.

It must be stressed that unity of purpose and reciprocal relationships do not in themselves mean that there needs at all times to be consensus and closure. Indeed there may be a prospect to celebrate dissent as the players seek to struggle with ambiguity, which must and should exist in human affairs. A truly reciprocal partnership permits its members to interrupt, to reopen debate, and to admit perplexity. It allows them to transcend those limits which lead inevitably to codification and recital. As McDonald (1988) reminds us:

The technocratic image will not do. Teaching requires wilder images: it is riding herd on sequences of largely unpredictable events, struggling to detect productive changes through a great gauze of uncertainty, fracturining with three of our own culture’s ‘villains’ - ambiguity, ambivalence, and instability. (p.83).

The progress of the National Schools Project has been noteworthy for the difficulty experienced by all of the participants as they discover how hard it is to work outside the certitude of institutional paradigms, which clearly instruct their members on how they should act under specific conditions. Teachers, accustomed to hierarchical models of school management have had to reconsider their roles and responsibilities; unionists have had to progress outside the norms of their culture with its focus on adversarial industrial negotiation; and, academics have needed to re-examine the ways in which they theorised practice, in that existing school management theories were inadequate to the purposes of the Project.

Indeed, the very writing of this paper represents the many tensions and struggles underlying authentic reciprocal relations. Written by three academics, at three Universities, it has required not only negotiation of the text, as it was collaboratively produced, but also discussion and debate with the key players in the National Project. Some believed it too academic, others that it was not sufficiently theoretical. We played with metaphors: were we looking for direction inexorably set down like railway tracks or were we ready to explore, as in songlines? Who’s intellectual property was it? What were the institutional norms under which it had been produced? And yet at this point we cannot say that this person contributed this sentence or that person modified a given paragraph. The effect is seamless, the result of that special synergy which reciprocal relations construct.

For partnership to progress beyond consultation and advice and to become genuinely reciprocal it is essential that the following features are recognised:

- a recognition of interdependence and the unique contribution the various parties bring to the relationship;
- constructive and imaginative problem solving;
- a will to work not only change but to improve;
- a working relationship which permits risk taking;
- a tolerance for ambiguity, uncertainty and dilemmas;
- joint responsibility for the planning, implementation and evaluation of outcomes;
- joint benefits of a commensurable kind;
- organisational structures which will facilitate the enactment of decisions;
- appropriate resourcing; and
- intercultural understanding.

To work effectively as partners takes both time and commitment. Institutional culture is a powerful agent in keeping elements apart (Groundwater-Smith, 1992). For example, the focus of employers and employees’ unions have, at times, been quite different. This does not necessarily mean that a partnership between each might need to more fully understand the cultural constraints of the other and find ways of not only communicating about these but also raising serious questions regarding the possibility for change as has been argued (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). In this case the parties have had to identify the operational impediments to effective communication both within and across the sectors and examine the ways in which these factors impact on change possibilities.

It has been argued that the National Schools Project is a professional development project as it induces the key players to rethink schooling processes. As such it is clearly a significant innovation within today’s context of educational reforms.

Current Reforms in Professional Development

In the current climate of educational reform and restructuring the nature of professional development is itself being re-examined. It is increasingly being acknowledged that the key to school improvement lies in a critical reorientation of educational practices, both within the classroom and the school itself (Joyce, Murphy, Showers & Murphy, 1989; Stallings, 1989; Stallings, 1989; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). It is recognised that the prospect of transforming educational institutions and their practices is more likely to come about when strongly framed, focused and explicit programmes of professional development, grounded in identified needs, are designed and implemented preferably through partnership arrangements between employers of teachers and administrators, teachers’ own professional associations, such as unions, and higher education institutions (Goodlad, 1988; Rudduck, 1992; Watson & Fullan, 1992).

Two important and related themes in this context have been the notion of the teacher as learner and researcher (Moore Johnson, 1991) and the integral role of higher education providers in a longitudinal view of professional development. The suggestion that teachers need career long training (in the most liberal meaning of the word) casts a new light on what has perhaps traditionally been a piecemeal approach. Barth (1986) has argued strongly that support for ongoing teacher learning has concomitant positive effects for students:

Only a school that is hospitable to adult learning can be a good place for students to learn. The notion of a community of learners implies that school is a context for lifelong growth, not only for growth among students. Adult learning is not only a means towards the end of school learning, but also an important objective in its own right.

Higher education institutions have an important contribution to make here. However, this role should not be that of service delivery, in which case the value of educational input is derived from the classroom. It is a professional development course in New South Wales, for example, that are gathered within the Joint Masters Leadership Development Programme. The programme is characterised as a collaborative initiative of the NSW Department of School Education who has negotiated agreements with universities, its aim is to “develop further the leadership skills of teachers and educational administrators, within the Department in either the field of educational administration or curriculum leadership” (DSE, 1992). The program offers participants opportunities to complete a one-semester unit of study which is developed, taught and assessed by members of the Department, in collaboration with
university personnel. It is usually offered in the second semester of the university year and comprises a two-day symposium, held in the Sydney metropolitan region. Here, senior officials of the Department deliver lectures on leadership issues relevant to Departmental policies and directions and university co-ordinators hold tutorials which emphasize critical discussion of the papers presented.

Such courses have their merits. However, they are significantly instrumental in their purpose in that they are designed to assist in the smooth implementation of the employing authority's goals and purposes. While they are jointly managed by the employing authorities and the award granting, higher education institutions they cannot be said to constitute a partnership in the fully reciprocal sense of the phrase (Groundwater-Smith, 1992).

Partnerships in Professional Development in the National Schools Project

It has already been indicated that the National Schools Project has been first and foremost a project which will enhance the professional development of all staff within the school with the outcomes being directed to the improvement of educational practice for the benefit of student children. Clearly, the focal point in changing school work organisations if the change is not one which will ultimately improve students' opportunities for achievement. Professional development, in this sense, goes well beyond in-service training. It is the opportunity for schools staffs to collegially and purposefully improve their practices in the management of the school’s work. Too often in-service training is focused on individuals (who may or may not be fully engaged) rather than on schools' overall improvement. This may result in isolation and division (Moore Johnson, 1991).

Furthermore, professional development which rests upon an understanding of practice which places the technical within the broader framework of reflective inquiry requires a process which will not only map the educational world, but also galvanise people to act in it in principled and enlightened ways (Kemmis, 1992). Currently there is some concern that there are only a few masters courses of a technical and decontextualised kind, but that they are also increasingly being offered as a commercial enterprise.

One cannot help but be struck by the extent to which public investment in teacher development has taken the form of ‘service delivery’ fed by a nearly inexhaustible market place of packaged programs and sophisticated presenters. (Little, 1992, p.175).

Little (1992) goes on to caution us regarding the oversimplification and standardisation of content in such courses. She argues that they are delivered in a mode which is unreflective and dependent upon summary presentations, brief talks and workshop exercises which can be undertaken and completed in a matter of days. Such courses are seen to have considerable initial appeal for teachers in that they provide a simulated professionalism. The packaging, the well designed pro-formas, the accessible language suggest processes which will be readily implementable in schools irrespective of their context and the diverse needs and experiences of those who participate in them.

As a form of professional development, the National Schools Project has redefined the notion of ‘course’. The course is effectively the overall school program of reform. It may be likened to a journey, an unfolding adventure. Such an undertaking is continuous, it is owned by the school community and develops in response to the perceived needs of that community. It requires ongoing systematic inquiry by those engaged with the development of professional accountability which are based upon ethical rather than managerial principles. There is the prospect to go beyond immediate functional strategies and to develop proactive educational practices which are authentically owned by all participants.

The potential for partnerships with parents, likewise, is an important, indeed crucial element in this project in that changes in school arrangements can often reverse or engulf the input and influence of parents directly upon the community. Regardless of whether the relationship with parents operates at the individual class or school level (Cronin, Slade, Bechtel & Anderson, 1992), or on the systems level, it is becoming increasingly clear that such plays a critical part in the education of young people. The current developments in devolution of school administration and policy development serve as a backdrop to the increasing influence and role of parents in the school. The Project aims to engage the school to its legitimate stakeholders must continue if educational services are to be responsive and needs driven.

As well, the National Schools Project has moved towards partnerships arrangements which are particularly creative and enterprising. As a project occurring under the auspices of the National Schools Project, those experienced in Partnership, Learning and Leadership are acknowledged partners in terms of the employing authorities and the unions. But here we also have the constituent parts, for example the schools, working in relation to each other and engaged in discussions with members of an academic reference group traumatised by the constraints which come about in the granting of academic awards.

The academic reference group works in two ways. Firstly, it acts as an advisory group to the state coordinators and the State Steering Committee of the Project and has facilitated the development of the research framework, the evaluation strategy and processes generally, its individual members provide support to schools where the staff are collaboratively constructing research and development activities. They provide an outsider’s view which may at times challenge the insiders’ taken-for granted beliefs regarding practice. However, such a challenge is seen as part of the reflexive process rather than as a threat or an expression of a status relationship. In this way the members of the academic reference group are working alongside the Project’s managers and school staff as change agents.

Change in entrenched practices is difficult when it, and its accompaniments of professional accountability are based upon ethical rather than managerial principles. There is the prospect to go beyond immediate functional strategies and to develop proactive educational practices which are authentically owned by all participants.

It is certainly the hope of the current partners that they will all take part in this struggle for understanding.

References:


& A. Hargreaves (Eds), Teacher development and educational change. Lewes: Falmer Press.


The initial proposal to join the National Schools Project focused on a number of areas for possible development. One was the improvement of transition processes from year seven to high school. Another was improved methods of monitoring student learning outcomes at the classroom level. A third was the establishment of teams of teachers sharing the task of teaching groups of children. Of these three original themes, two have survived in recognisable form. Transition to high school was taken up by primary staff at a cluster level. The intention to develop improved monitoring of learning outcomes later became subsumed into the school’s work on National Profiles. It was the third area which became the central focus of the National Schools Project commitment. The notion of ‘team teaching’ was broadened to include the work of school services officers (support staff who are not qualified teachers) as the result of the inclusion of a school services officer in the original think tank.