Transforming student teacher practices through action research reflective practice Call for reform in UAE Education

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Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is currently experiencing major reform of its K-12 education. Recent years have seen several major education reform initiatives in the UAE which have included reform of the curriculum and of the role of teachers. Mograby (1999) lists a number of reasons for the need for reform, including inappropriate methods of teaching and learning, which have been "largely a combination of teacher-directed rote learning using state developed curriculum and test-driven assessment" (McNally, Harold, & McAskill, 2002 para.1). This has resulted in students demonstrating low achievement and lack of motivation (Syed, 2003). This model of teaching can be termed a "transmission model," which focuses on the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student. This has traditionally given limited scope for teachers to develop their teaching repertoire or engage in curriculum development (McNally et al., 2002). Educational reform requires teachers with new knowledge and skills; teachers who are proactive and "capable of generating their own professional dynamic" (Wallace, 1996, p. 281). It is clear that change in the preparation of teachers will be needed to respond to these new challenges.

Within educational reform, the role that teachers play is critical. Fullan states that "educational change depends on what teachers think and do- it's as simple and as complex as that" (2001, p. 115). Barber, Mourshed and Whelan, (2007) in their report on the education systems in the Gulf state explicitly that, despite development already achieved in the Gulf region, "to make further progress, they must shift their focus-above all, too improving the skills of teachers" (p. 39). However, Zeichner and Liston (1996) discuss the difficulties of developing teachers from technicians and "consumers of curriculum knowledge" to being able to contribute to reform through "formulating the purpose and ends of their work" (p. 4). They assert that in times of education reform, teachers need to be able to take on roles of leadership and be proactive in curriculum development. In times such as these, transformational approaches need to be taken in terms of student and teacher learning.

The Case for Reflective Teaching

Zeichner and Liston (1996) make a distinction between a technical focus in teaching, which seeks to solve problems through beliefs that are not questioned by the teacher, and teaching which is reflective, whereby the teacher "thinks both about how they frame and then how to solve the question at hand" (p. 5). This latter model of teaching allows teachers to take control of teaching, to select strategies appropriate to students' needs and to have the ability to solve problems they face independently. Amobi (2006) sees this as reflective teaching and claims it as the "quintessential element that breathes life to high-quality teaching" (p. 24) and asserts that high quality teaching involves the "need for reflection as the lighthouse for enlightening the path to ever-maturing and self renewing growth in teaching" (p. 25).

Reflective teaching is, however, complex and vague (Chant, Heafner, & Bennet, 2004; Lee, 2007; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Zeichner and Liston (1996) list five key elements of reflective teaching:

- posing and solving classroom based problems
- an awareness of beliefs and assumptions
- an awareness of the context of teaching
- involvement in whole school and curriculum issues
- personal responsibility for professional development

They assert that it is "the critical examination of experiences, knowledge and values, an understanding of the consequences of one's teaching, the ability to provide heartfelt justifications for one's beliefs and actions and a commitment to equality and respect for differences" (p.48).

This is an additional perspective to teaching which moves way beyond classroom behaviors and implies a moral awareness of the role and purpose of education. Amobi (2006) sees reflective teaching as a theory generating mechanism whereby teachers use critical reflection to create their own personal theories. What links these different conceptualizations are the role of meaning making at a personal level and a sense of reformulating and personalizing assumptions, beliefs and theories based on experience. In addition there is the notion of teachers being involved in education rather than merely teaching; that teachers are involved in the moral endeavor of education. In other words the focus is on what teachers know and believe rather than merely on what teachers do (Lee, 2007).

Despite the lack of agreement on the precise meaning of reflective teaching there is wide agreement on the benefits. The benefits fall into three main categories; teacher professional development, student learning outcomes and education change and reform.

The transformational nature of reflective teaching is also recognized and it is this aspect which makes this a particularly attractive model for teachers and teacher educators in the UAE. If teacher educators are to develop reflective teaching from the onset of a teacher's professional life they need to be able to clarify and simplify it. One way of doing this is to introduce a systematic approach to reflection as typified by action research. Wallace (1996) claims that action research is "a form of structured reflection on professional action which is controlled and implemented by the practitioners themselves with the intention of improving some aspect of their professional practice" (p. 291). Action research can be viewed as a form of systematic, classroom based reflection conducted by practitioners on their own practice. As it focuses on particular problems faced by practitioners in situ, it has the potential of "gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving outcomes and the lives of those involved" (Mills, 2003, p. 5). It is focused on specific practice by specific practitioners and is therefore contextualized and specific (Wallace, 1996).

Classroom based action research

"Action research has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change. Action research helps to develop teachers and administrators with professional attitudes that embrace action, progress, and reform rather than stability and mediocrity" (Mills 2003, p. v). In the UAE there is a desire to move beyond mediocrity and to bring about transformational reform; action research is, therefore, an appealing model for both initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD).

The role of teachers as researchers has considerable support (Freeman, 1996; Kincheloe, 2003; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) and there is a recognized need for research to be conducted by those inside as well as outside the classroom. Freeman (1996) quotes a line from singer, Barbara Lee, who claimed, "You have to know the story in order to tell the story" (p. 90) as a way to explain the role of teacher research. One way for teachers to "tell their story" and explain what they know is to engage in classroom based action research. Teachers are uniquely placed to examine the effects of theories as they play out in their particular classroom contexts. A further benefit of teacher based research is that it can become a source of professional empowerment (O'Connor, Greene, & Anderson, 2006), creating a "professional disciplinary community" which can give teachers "value and prestige" (Freeman 1998, p.11) as a result of the potential for teachers to become producers of knowledge about teaching and learning and not merely consumers.

Reflective teaching as a paradigm dominates teacher education worldwide (Richards & Ho, 1998) and some form of systematic reflection is common to many initial teacher education programs (Lee 2007). Amobi argues that student and new teachers need to be "reflective as well as effective" (2006, p. 24) and makes an impassioned plea for reflective teaching to be

included in initial teacher education. This plea has been taken up by the B.Ed program at the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) which sees the development of reflective practice as a core objective.

The action research project: experiences from the HCT

Reflective practice is developed throughout the four year B.Ed program at the HCT. In the first three years students engage in reflection during teaching practice, and other activities have been developed which encourage a critical, reflective stance such as peer observations, online discussions and practical teaching projects with specific reflective components. During the final year this reflection is formalized through a year long classroom based action research project. The students identify an area of classroom practice to focus on and then implement strategies to address problems in that area and collect data on the results of the implementation of those strategies. The aims of this project are:

- to link theory to practice
- to transform teaching strategies
- to transform student learning outcomes
- to develop professionalism and create lifelong learners
- to empower teachers and raise their status

In the following section these outcomes are analyzed through an examination of the experiences of student and graduate teachers of the B.Ed program at a college within the HCT. This analysis is based on interviews with four graduates of the program who are currently working in schools in the UAE, Huda, Amal T, Amal P and Amal C. The first three are all primary teachers of English in government schools in the UAE and Amal C currently works as an English language teacher of hearing impaired students, after working initially in a government primary school. Samples of work from several undergraduates are also used, but these are not attributed for privacy reasons.

Development of reflective practice

Action research is a form of systematic reflective practice and one of the perceived outcomes of engaging in action research is the development of reflective practice in student teachers, which impacts on their practice after graduation. Chant et al. (2004) conducted a study to find out the effects that a professional development project (which included aspects of action research) had on student teacher beliefs and practices. They found that reflection became "ingrained" in the students' expectations for studying as well as for their future careers. Likewise students and graduates from the HCT program acknowledge that the research project helped them develop their ability to reflect on their practice and adopt a critical stance in terms of their own practice both as student teachers and future professionals.

Amal C has been particularly challenged by the move to teaching language to the hearing impaired but discussed how the process of the action research project helped her:

> It enabled me to reflect on my teaching over and over again. Every time I do something that doesn't work I reflect and I think about other ways of conducting the same topic... to reach the students.

Huda also speaks of how engaging in systematic reflection helps in solving problems:

> If we have a problem...I need to ...find out the solution, which is the same process as action research. So I need to identify the problem and find the reasons and also try to

> *find the solutions...in the college it was just part of teaching somehow…but here we are doing it...without being aware that you are doing action research.*

Undergraduate students also highlight this aspect:

> *The action research increased my awareness and readiness to be self critical. It encouraged me to think and reflect on my work.*

> *Working on this research also taught me about the action research process and how to use it to solve problems in the future. Therefore it was an essential part of my professional development this year.*

Huda also suggests another possible benefit of having engaged in action research, that of risk taking:

> *If you want to do something, go ahead, try it, even if you fail...go and do it. Always for myself I have high expectations. If I am doing something, if I fail I can do it again, so why don't I try, because I'm ready to challenge*

Do you feel you're not afraid to try anything?

> *No I'm not afraid, really...that thing we take it from the college. That thing we try, we really feel proud of it. They ask us to do anything, we are ready to do it. If it's a challenge, we are not afraid.*

This suggests the sense of confidence and empowerment which has come in part from having engaged in systematic reflection which encourages student teachers to take risks in terms of their classroom strategies.

Link theory to practice

Both O'Connor et al (2006) and Kincheloe (2003) outline how classroom based action research can link theory to practice. This is an important aspect of initial teacher education. Amobi (2006) points out that teacher education courses can be heavy on content at the expense of developing reflection and argues that as teacher educators, "Our immediate charge is to prepare them to teach; our enduring mission is to empower them to personalize and own the craft of teaching" (p.25). This ability to "own the craft of teaching" implies personal meaning making and the development of autonomy and self efficacy. This is borne out by student comments:

> *Also, I could bridge the gap between theory and practice which made me aware that not every theory can be applied perfectly as there are incidents [that] occur in the class [that] demand change.*

This last quote illustrates how through action research students are able to take theories and experiment with them and assess how suitable these are for their own teaching context. This also suggests an element of empowerment in terms of analyzing the particular needs of particular classrooms and students.

Transforming teacher knowledge, instructional strategies and student learning

O'Connor et al (2006) claim that the process of action research can enhance learning through "improving instructional practices and reflecting about pedagogical choices" (p. 4). Thus teacher learning can occur by "trying new strategies...expanding instructional repertoire, engaging in

professional development, and most importantly helping teachers develop new pedagogical knowledge" (Henson 1996 in O'Connor et al 2006 p. 7). Simply put, "the action research process elicits change" (O'Connor et al, 2006 p. 22). Graduate students discussed how they had transformed their practice and thus students' learning. Huda discussed how she is able to select, adapt and create effective strategies and approaches for her particular students:

> *For me I'm teaching Grade 1. In their book it's just pictures, it's just identify vocab... They don't have actual … focus on the alphabet, how to read, how to write. So what we decided was that we just need to challenge them, to give something above because they can do it...You can't believe it...They can read the words...without pictures.*

> *We know how to adapt*

Amal P discussed how her action research enabled her to deal with students in her class:

> *I use the mixed ability groups and also rewarding the students. If I see anyone is quiet... they really follow her. And also I always keep them busy.*

> *How have you learned to do that?*

> *Because I learned this from my action research...It was about giving instructions before activities and it was one of my rules.*

Student teachers also spoke of how the act of implementing, reflecting and observing enabled them to increase their pedagogical repertoire:

> *This research increased my belief in the communicative approach and its emphasis on meaningful communication between students to develop language acquisition. This research enabled me to look and observe the challenges students may face while doing an oral task and how to overcome those challenges by providing suitable tasks that are pitched at the students' right level.*

> *Action research helped me prove that shared reading is a successful method to attract student attention towards reading.*

These students seem to be "owning the craft of teaching" (Amobi 2006, p. 24) as they adopt and adapt approaches to their own teaching context.

The power of transforming classroom practice also benefits the students themselves by transforming their learning outcomes. Amal T faced problems with low ability children in her grade 4 class:

> *I'm trying to help them individually, to focus on each student. I'm also putting them in mixed ability groups so they are sitting with very high level students...I am also trying to take them for half an hour in the morning...three times a week.*

The above quote demonstrates an awareness of and a desire to address individual difference. Linking this awareness to reflective practice and subsequent action suggests evidence of a morality of equity of opportunity in her teaching. Zeichner and Liston describe a view of reflective teaching that holds that merely reflecting does not necessarily result in good teaching; that teachers should be guided in that reflection by "the values of equality and respect for differences" (1996, p. 48). That moral sense was spoken of forcefully by the graduates. Amal C has faced difficulties teaching a hearing and sight impaired young student and it is both her respect for differences as well as her ability to create and adapt that has enabled to design appropriate strategies:

He finds it difficult to write in small lines so everything is on an overhead projector by my laptop and we go and sit by the board and we work together because he finds it difficult to see and write at the same time.

So is that your own strategy?

Yes so I try and help him... and I told him, 'We're gonna get a comfy chair for you by the board so we can work together...It's great for him.

Huda explains how having high expectations can transform the learning experiences of students:

They can do it...that's what I believe, why not try, even if it's not all the students, some of them, why not give them the chance?

I learned that I should not underestimate the learners but I should encourage them to do more. Because I was amazed with the quick response to the dictionary notebook and how they changed and developed their learning quickly.

It also helped me to see that we need to have high expectations on our students and push them to reach their potential.

Several students reported that the process of action research that they undertook while at college encouraged them to expand their instructional repertoire, try new strategies and develop new pedagogical knowledge i.e. to change their classroom practices.

Development of lifelong learning

Zeichner and Liston (1996) highlight the potential action research has for developing a commitment to lifelong learning and that this can be a powerful approach to CPD:

When embracing the concept of reflective teaching, there is often a commitment by teachers to internalize the disposition and skills to study their teaching and become better at teaching over time, a commitment to take responsibility for their own professional development (p. 6).

The students and graduates all indicated that this process of enquiry and reflection had become a part of their teaching identity. Amal T discussed how she has developed problem solving skills:

Do you think you have skills for dealing with problems?

I feel that maybe this is something I learned here in college. You know I feel that we learned to depend a lot on ourselves to search, to read, maybe to ask a more professional or experienced people, so I feel whenever I face something I can solve this. Sometimes I go and search the internet if I face something...I feel I can deal with things.

Amal C discussed how she dealt with the behavior problems with her students:

Adjusting was a little bit difficult...I had six students and they were extremely hyperactive and nobody tried ever to control their behaviors. So when I established a new way of behavior management it was very helpful.

How did you judge how effective that strategy was?

By entering the class and seeing everybody on their chairs. Nobody speaks. Nobody

even tries to sign to anybody else and their eyes are on me. And this happened today in the morning and I felt I did something to them.

Where did that strategy come from?

This was my action research so I implemented the activity based on my research because it worked the first time. I tried it with my students and it worked. I saw the result so I was confident when I did this.

In terms of becoming lifelong learners one student remarked:

After what I experienced and learned, I am really looking forward to carry out a research in the real teaching field, which can develop my personal and professional growth.

Empowerment/creation of professional community

Action research can bring about "educational change that enhances the lives of children … But action research can also enhance the lives of professionals" (Mills, 2003, p. 10). Chant et al (2004), found that the "action research processes helped the candidates become teacher leaders" (p. 37). All of the graduates I interviewed spoke about helping other teachers by giving them ideas and strategies. Collaboration has become a significant aspect of their professional identity.

Amal P told me about sharing their knowledge and skills with other teachers:

We feel it that they take something from us, we give them something...we share something.

Amal T told me how the strategy that she researched in her action research project (look, say, cover, write, check strategy for spelling) is now being used by an Arabic teacher who is excited by the results she has seen in her students' Arabic writing. This suggests a power to not only transform the practice of teachers and their students but also the power to transform a teaching community. When I had finished my interview with Huda and we were discussing the working conditions of teachers and pay levels Huda told me that her principal had told her all the parents in the school were talking about her and Amal P. What more did she need she asked, than to have the respect of 600 families. Transformational indeed.

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