

**Collaborative Action Research Projects:
the role of Communities of Practice and Mentoring in enhancing teachers'
Continuing Professional Development**

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Abstract

The assumption that learning is a distinct and primarily individual process, a process initiated, controlled and completed as the result of teaching interventions, is reflected upon the typical design, development and management of educational institutions around the globe. Similar assumptions appear to apply for teachers' training and development. Over recent years, there has been an upsurge of interest concerning the planning and implementation of collaborative action research projects, denoting the value and significance of such initiatives in the field of teachers' continuous professional development. Action research is a reflective process of progressive problem solving and it seems that through action-based inquiry teachers are enhanced to better understand and extend their professional activity as well as reflect on their teaching problems. The present paper aspires to reveal the way in which innovatory mentoring programmes combined with collaborative action research initiatives and communities of practice may help teachers to move from a position of dependency to one of greater independence and professional autonomy.

Keywords: Action Research; Continuing Professional Development; Critical Friendships; Mentoring Process; Reflection; Reflective Teacher.

1. Introduction

Teaching is a multifaceted, highly skilled and demanding activity, which above all requires classroom teachers to reflect and "exercise judgment in deciding how to act" (Pollard et al., 2008:5). Regardless of the educational setting in which they work, teachers often find themselves in front of difficult educational dilemmas, deemed as challenges to expand their reflective practice and classroom effectiveness. Besides, the act of stepping back, reflecting, collecting information and observing classroom interaction with the intent of solving such educational dilemmas, is considered to be the cornerstone of any action research project (Punch, 2009). This

procedure seems to help teachers realize what Pollard et al. (2008:17) refer to as the “cyclical or spiraling process” of reflective teaching, involving a continuous monitoring, evaluating and revising of one’s own practice, which is a demanding and rather thorny task.

Day (2001) acknowledges teachers as the greatest resource of any school and emphasizes the importance of continuous learning as a fundamental factor for them to correspond to their educational functions and purposes. Teachers often experience an array of unpleasant emotions, anxieties and uncertainties, which are described as a “lost at sea” or “sink or swim” feeling in the related literature (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011: 202). They also feel worried about having suitable schemes of work, setting appropriate standards or using correct procedures and pedagogical techniques. Hence, being supported by more experienced colleagues, by “a significant other” (Carter & Francis, 2001:256), in order to achieve their pedagogical goals, reflect and redefine their instructional practices and teaching strategies, often emerges as an imperative need. Through reflection teachers gradually acquire new insights for practice; they enrich, systematize and construct professional knowledge as well (Mena Marcos et al., 2009).

Besides, in today’s globalized learning environments, beneficial feedback, emotional support, professional socialization, pedagogical guidance and constructive critique are all considered to be critical cornerstones of contemporary mentoring programmes (He, 2009), gradually leading to teachers’ continuing professional development, an “active, ongoing, reflective, collaborative, planned and focused” process (Robson, 2006: 345), which is increasingly regarded as a necessary part of teachers’ working lives (Crockett, 2007). The review of the related literature reveals that the best approach to continuous professional development is through what Mitchell et al. (2009) refer to as *collaborative action research model*, which seems to have the added benefit of offering an appropriate context and framework for forming a community of practice or a community of inquiry (Bruce & Easley, 2000) within the classroom. Through communication we are able to establish our shared beliefs, values and goals, and “these shared things are the basis for our communities, which are, in turn, established, maintained and expanded through communication” (ibid:248).

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed an approach of learning in social terms and studied the ways people, who share the same conditions, engage with each other and learn collectively through practice, in order to pursue “joint enterprises”. Along the same lines, Wenger (1998: 10) asserts that explicitly available information is only a fragment of actual knowledge and that “knowing involves primarily active participation in social communities”. The present paper will attempt to highlight the way in which action-orientated inquiry, mediated by the availability of suitable and flexible mentoring programmes may help contemporary teachers generate valuable insights about teaching as well enhance their professional development.

2. The need for Continuing Professional Development: towards becoming a reflective teacher

There is a good deal of variation in the international research literature in the way the term *continuing professional development* has been used, but most researchers seem to wholly agree that it is gradually being recognized

as an essential component for all professionals, “in order to maintain and develop their competence” (Muijs & Lindsay, 2008: 195). Besides, Peterson et al. (2010: 156) define it as a “transformational process of personal growth that involves expanding one’s knowledge base and building new skills and competencies”. Along the same line, Fullan (1991, cited in Kyriakides et al., 2006: 9) argues that “as long as the need for change in the educational system exists, teachers’ professional development is also imperative”, reflecting teachers’ aspiration to improve their skills and deepen their knowledge (GTC, 2003: 12, cited in Harrison et al., 2005: 420).

McFarland et al. (2009: 506) acknowledge that reflection and evaluation are two separate processes that educators can use to critically analyze their educational techniques: reflective practice is a cycle that involves “thinking critically about alternative perspectives and changing teaching methods based on new understandings”; evaluation is an ongoing process through which teachers can self-reflect and engage in dialogue with other professionals about current and future practices, aiming to review the value or effectiveness of their teaching strategies and enhance their teaching and learning. Therefore, teachers seem to gradually advance from *reflecting-in-action*, almost unconsciously and instantaneously (Dymoke & Harrison, 2008: 10), using a “repertoire” of examples and understandings (Schön, 1983:138), towards *reflecting-on-action*, i.e. towards “a more deliberative and conscious process”, including further “critical analysis and evaluation” of the actions undertaken in class (Dymoke & Harrison, 2008: 11).

Although both of these reflection types can certainly involve technical aspects of teaching, they are also value laden and stem from experiential and contextualized knowledge, while teachers’ perceptions, beliefs, classroom context and students seem to provide the source of knowledge for reflective action (Del Carlo et al., 2010). Similarly, Brookfield (1995) emphasizes the significance of the critically reflective teacher, who is constantly trying to acquire an increased awareness of his or her teaching from as many different points of views as possible, further considering self-reflection, the *autobiographical lens*, as the underpinning of critical reflection. Apparently, it is a dynamic process, often referred to as experiential learning. Kolb’s (1984, in Harrison et al., 2005) experiential learning cycle highlights that “experience (*action*) is systematically followed by reflection, learning (*review*) and experimentation (*further action*)”.

Katz (1972, in Couse & Russo, 2006), an international leader in early childhood education, identified four stages of teachers’ development. Therefore, in the first stage of survival, beginning teachers feel inadequately prepared to meet the needs of the classroom, further denoting that mentoring and support are crucial to their success and longevity in the field. In the second stage of consolidation, teachers start focusing on individual children, differentiating the skills and the tasks to be mastered. In the third stage of renewal, teachers start looking for innovations in the field. Finally, in the stage of maturity, educators come to terms with themselves, asking deeper and more vital questions. Upon this premise, teachers’ professional development seems to be a complicated and multifaceted process, since it encompasses the acquisition of both propositional (“knowing that”) as well as process (“knowing how”) knowledge (Eraut, 1997, in Day, 2003: 132).

In addition, the highly competitive, fast-changing social, economic and technological conditions of our time constantly raise the standards in education and, subsequently, in teachers’ development (Day, 2001).

Governments, schools and teachers share the responsibility to design and implement successful, contemporary development frameworks, which will eventually contribute decisively to the successful development of schools. In this context, traditional approaches seem insufficient, since they often seem to fail in fulfilling “the goal of retaining good teachers or improving practice” (Mitchell, 2009: 345). Recent trends in teacher expertise development highlight the social dimension, i.e. the need for a more collective approach which a) could render teachers’ professional development more meaningful and applicable for everyday classroom, b) would enhance a creative culture of shared expertise and collective wisdom (Mitchell, 2009) and c) would focus on teachers’ fundamental characteristics that may create value-added learning (Lasley et al., 2006).

3. Collaborative Action Research Projects: the potential contribution of Communities of Practice in teachers’ Professional Development

The term *action research* was first coined by the social scientist Kurt Lewin in 1946 that codified the action research process into four main stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Newby, 2010). His model of action research is practically a series of spirals “each of which incorporates a cycle of analysis, reconnaissance, reconceptualization of the problem, planning of the intervention, implementation of the plan and evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention” (Cohen et al., 2007: 305). This process of self-reflection and self-evaluation can be proved a significant contributor to teachers’ continuing professional development, since it seems to provide them with important information regarding issues of teaching and learning, while it helps them redefine their role in classroom (Koutsoupidou, 2010).

Lewin’s paper on *Action Research and Minority Problems* brought the term into existence, established the research approach and purpose, seeking to develop and implement change (Newby, 2010). Since then, the term has been broadly used to describe a bewildering array of activities and methods. Therefore, action research seems to focus “on *action* and *research* simultaneously and in participative manner” (Coghlan & Brannick, 2004, in Gray, 2009: 313), whereas action researchers “engage in careful, diligent inquiry, not for purposes of discovering new facts or revising accepted laws or theories, but in order to acquire information about practical applications to the solution of specific problems related to their work (Stringer, 2004, cited in Punch, 2009: 135).

Similarly, the review of the related literature reveals that every action research project is practically a process of systematic reflection, enquiry and action, conducted by teachers who want to study and evaluate their teaching strategies and educational practices, in order to change and improve them (Costello, 2003; Ferrance, 2000). Change is regarded as an integral part of research, involving “a feedback loop in which initial findings generate possibilities for change which are then implemented and evaluated as a prelude to further investigation” (Denscombe, 1998: 123).

Therefore, action research acquires another crucial dimension: it transforms the educational practice into a meaningful pedagogical process (Kapachtsi & Kakana, 2010: 44). Along the same line, Koutselini-Ioannidou (2010:

5) denotes that action research in the field of education comprises an original cyclical process, which moves “from action to reflection and from reflection to new action with the active involvement of all participants in authentic learning environments”, further allowing the production of new knowledge and a deeper understanding of the learning process.

However, a considerable amount of studies in the field of action research (Mitchell, 2009; Bruce & Easley, 2000) signify that the success of every action research project largely depends on the researcher’s success with working with other people, such as action research colleagues, i.e. students on a taught programme or colleagues in a professional development programme (Gray, 2009). By engaging in the formation of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2006) focused on collaborative action research, this process highlight the importance of sharing information, experiences and thoughts, of continuous interaction as well as of participating in joint activities. Therefore, knowledge does not reside only in teachers’ heads, but also “in the meanings, relations, activities and skillful executions of praxis” (Mitchell, 2009: 348).

The extent and the quality of conscious sharing within collaborative action research projects, the tools used for enabling the community, and above all the ability of the community to engage its members by generating enthusiasm, relevance, and value (Wenger et al., 2002) are considered as factors of major importance. By inspiring the community and motivating its members, collaborative action research provides the added benefit of being a suitable context and framework in which learning is initiated, the acquired information is to be transformed into action and tacit knowledge is gradually transformed into explicit knowledge (Vaiyavutjamai et al., 2012). In this complex network of relations, specifications and limitations, in which learning and performance are actively and directly connected in a regime of mutual accountability (Wenger, 2006), the role of leadership and management can be decisive. Communities can be “inspired, helped, supported, enlightened, unshackled, or empowered” (Wenger, 1998: 6); intervention in a Community of Practice is accepted and desired, when it aims to inform and reinforce rather than to enforce and disseminate power relationships (Wenger et al., 2009).

This is particularly important, since it reveals the imperative need for an innovative and flexible mentoring framework within Communities of Practice, i.e. within the framework of collaborative action research projects.

4. The role of mentoring in the collaborative action research process

The term and concept of mentoring date back to ancient Greece, in Homer’s *Odyssey*, when Odysseus’ son Telemachus received pedagogical guidance from a family friend called Mentor. As someone who is older and more experienced, Mentor contributed to the growth and development of a younger and less experienced person (Onchwari & Keengwe, 2008). Bush (2009: 379) defines mentoring as a process “where one person provides individual support and challenge to another professional”.

Besides, Hibert (2000: 16), trying to outline the framework of the mentoring leadership, vividly denotes that mentoring helps “understand the process of applying leadership models and theories as well as become more

reflective and thoughtful about why I do what I do and how I go about doing it". In recent years, it is widely acknowledged in the related literature that effective mentoring is an utmost important factor in career development and advancement (Ihmeideh et al., 2008). Hence, in contemporary collaborative action research projects, participants seem to undertake a new remarkable and pivotal role for providing mutual support and sharing information resources, whilst they also try to develop an appropriate mentoring framework: *both* critical colleagues, working with action researchers and willing to critically and supportively discuss about research, *and* mentors, whose role is to challenge action researchers' thinking so that the direction of the project can be refocused or reshaped, form a validating group of help and support for all action research projects (Gray, 2009).

Over recent years, theorists of the field have attempted to give new definitions for the new aspects of mentoring. Upon this premise, action research is mostly seen as an aspect of peer mentoring and collaborative teamwork within a community of learners (Simpson et al., 2007), i.e. a Community of Practice (Wenger, 2006): it seeks to pursue teacher change and development through peer review and collegial interaction as well as to improve school culture as a whole. Hence, *peer mentoring* or *co-mentoring* (Le Cornu, 2005: 358) reconstructs the relationship between mentors and mentees as non-hierarchical, since "both are positioned as co-learners or co-constructors of knowledge", participating equally in the learning community.

Besides, in a number of teacher mentoring programmes, there has been frequent use of the notion of *critical friendship*. According to Swaffield (2008), a critical friend provides challenge, support and advocacy within a relationship – which may be one-to-one or involve a critical friend working with a group of people – by questioning, reflecting back and providing an innovative, alternative and enhancing point of view. Therefore, under conditions of an open, honest and trustful communication, critical friends are called to mutually share supplementary knowledge, experiences and skills (Day, 2003). The aforementioned nature of teacher collaboration within action research projects seems to have a significant impact both on teacher learning and on organizational learning as well (Fletscher & Barrett, 2005).

As Onchwari & Keengwe (2008: 21) effectively argue, "collegial models enable teachers to talk about practice, observe others' practice and work together to plan, design and evaluate curriculum". Along the same line, Jones et al. (1997), drawing upon the model of "collaborative partnership" proposed by Furlong (1996), claim that mentoring is more effective, when it incorporates practical help, such as regular guidance, immediate feedback, modeling good teaching and classroom management as well as advising and helping about time management.

In this way, mentoring philosophy and practice assume a multidimensional role of major importance: it gradually becomes "a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools, or looking for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement" (Ferrance, 2000:1). It is based, thus, on reciprocal respect and learning, further combining the major principles of democratic pedagogy: problem-posing, dialogue and problem-solving (Freire, 1959, in Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007). Consequently, upon reflective dialogues and opinion exchange as well as by trying to create "a climate of trust and

support” among teachers, an agreed curriculum framework is formed, based on “shared goals, shared decision making and shared resources” (Ling Li, 2004).

Gilles & Wilson (2004) highlight this mutuality within action research projects, arguing that as mentors start thinking about topics and concepts from their mentees’ viewpoint, they very often redefine their own philosophies and existing beliefs, adapting their teaching methods and styles in new teaching approaches and educational theories. However, concerns about what Athanases et al. (2008: 748) refer to as “*a mentoring programme’s null curriculum*”, including all those complicated and unpredictable parameters of the mentor and the mentee’s nature or temperament often arise. Personal friendships between mentors and action researchers may also imply a rather subjective relationship, which is potentially threatening, as it can lead to the decentralization of power by one party (Gardiner, 2010). Frequently asked questions, such as “where are the boundaries for mentor’s personal, professional, ethical and moral considerations?”, “how do mentors know what they know?”, “what assures that mentors are able to effectively guide and support action researchers?” (Jones & Straker, 2006), all reflect crucial aspects of the dynamic interrelationship between effective mentoring and action research process, further outlined in the following paragraphs of the present paper.

5. Educating the effective mentor

According to recent models of mentoring, mentors integrate three basic functions: offering support, creating a challenge and facilitating a professional vision. Empathy is also a factor of the mentoring relationship that is associated with teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and is potentially a key factor in increasing teachers’ competence in the classroom (Peterson et al., 2010). Becoming an effective mentor apparently takes extensive time and experience. One of the most demanding abilities of the mentoring process is to learn to mentor in educative ways and upon this premise, mentor teachers need above all opportunities to “clarify their vision of good teaching, to develop skills in observing and talking about teaching in analytic, nonjudgmental ways (Feiman-Nemser, 2003: 29).

Effective mentors can be of great help, guiding teachers to focus on pursuing positive outcomes, to prioritize their goals and set indicators for success (He, 2009). Furthermore, successful mentors function as educational companions (Fletscher & Barrett, 2005), helping teachers to learn about school rules and policies, as well as solve immediate classroom problems. Hence, in education settings and regarding action research projects, mentors appear to assume a multidimensional and demanding role, encompassing both professional and personal responsibilities, all influenced and informed by a potent knowledge base: in their professional dimension, mentors are not only trainers, observers and organizers but also providers of feedback, reflective practitioners and assessors. In their personal dimension, mentors are called to be effective counselors, communicators, supporters and friends (Ihmeideh et al., 2008; Waniganayake, 2002). With such responsibilities, mentors gradually understand development

and learning at deeper levels and they gradually build their confidence and professional courage (Gilles & Wilson, 2004).

Besides, evidence drawn from the literature review reveals that the mentoring process is inextricably linked with two of the most important dimensions of the transformational leadership (Brownlee et al., 2010): 1) intellectual stimulation, which focuses on how mentors encourage staff to think in creative and stimulating ways and 2) individualized consideration, focusing on how they engage with staff members on an individual, inspiring and motivating basis. Besides, in the twenty-first century, there has been a significant shift from the learning content towards the learning process, while greater emphasis has been laid on more person-centered learning approaches, which seem to require multiple skills of guiding and mentoring.

Collaborative action research projects seem to be strongly related to contemporary pioneering mentoring programmes and their benefits in terms of mentoring are broadly documented in several studies (Mitchell et al., 2009; Bruce & Easley, 2000): by fostering a positive mentor-mentee relationship, collaborative action research projects support teachers' professional development, help teachers increase their level of self-efficacy and also develop their intellectual capacities, in order to cope with the demands of everyday classroom life. In today's globalized learning environments teachers' experience is reassessed through reflection and shared with peer members, whilst learning occurs in context and it is actively connected with practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2006; Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007). In this way mentors' role is gradually redefined and restructured: Cross (1995) indicates the three most important qualities of the effective mentor, encompassing mentor's ability to inspire the teaching principles and values in the mentee, to reinforce mentee's confidence through encouragement and praise, as well as to instill the resilience and flexibility necessary for teachers, in order to meet the challenges they face.

Similarly, Le Cornu (2005) proposes three fundamental components of effective mentoring programmes: 1) a mentoring attitude, underpinned by reciprocity, where both mentors and mentees are required to adopt the role of learner, 2) the interpersonal skills, including the climate of trust between mentors and mentees, and 3) the critical reflection skills, which will enable both parts to engage in the level of a substantial learning conversation.

6. Concluding Remarks

One of the key understandings acquired through the review of the related literature, is that some of the most fundamental teachers' values, such as self-knowledge, continuous professional development, the ability for critical, reflective and creative thought as well as "the search for new insights" (Beattie, 2002: 201), are strongly associated with effective mentoring practices and collaborative action research projects. A key term in any contemporary action research approach is "*empowerment*", largely considered as "a matter of the professional sphere of operations, achieving professional autonomy through professional development" (Cohen et al., 2007: 303).

The present paper proposed a framework for conceptualizing teachers' continuous professional development through the lens of effective mentoring, reflective practice within communities of practice and collaborative action research projects. The term *reflection*, as considered in this article, encompasses a critical inquiry and a deep reconsideration of personal beliefs, assumptions and values. Based upon the premise that effective mentoring is much more than a compilation of skills and strategies, this paper aspired to define the role of the reflective teacher as a social intermediary and a learning catalyst, to "de-emphasize the role of external researcher and to stress the value of groups of practitioners carrying out their own enquiries into their own situation, though linked for mutual support in a loose network" (Robson, 2002: 216).

The ability of teachers to reflect on their teaching methods and interact with peers within Communities of Practice in new ways and beyond any time or space limitations (Wenger, 2006) was further considered as cornerstone of every collaborative action research approach (Grossman et al., 2001), whereas *improvement* and *involvement* revealed as two central features of contemporary mentoring and collaborative action research projects.

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