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Chapter One: Teachers Investigating Their Teaching

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the important role that teachers play in raising student achievement. As chapters in this book will illustrate, improvements in teaching performance can be sustainably supported by the implementation of a 'job embedded' approach to professional learning. The thesis of this chapter is that the 'Teacher As Researcher' construct is a tangible way of engaging teachers in professional learnings that have direct impact on their own learning need and that of their students.

The Importance of Teachers

This book comes off a belief that we as education researchers, leaders and practitioners have, that school improvement should be the goal of every school leader and every teacher. This goal requires a relentless commitment to asking more 'how come and why' type questions, to engage with problem solving, innovation, critical reflection and continuous professional learning, at all levels and across all sectors of the School (Madden, 2015; Doe, 2015, 2014, 2013; Lynch, 2012; Lynch, et al 2014;). Achieving such a goal is a complex affair and thus relies on a number of conditions, no less so than effective and focused school leadership (Doe, 2015; Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Lynch, 2012; Lynch and Madden, 2014). This is particularly so because those who have been involved in change processes in schools come to appreciate that effective leadership is fundamental to an orchestration and focusing of the many stakeholders and the various affiliate interest groups that operate within and without the school (Madden, 2013).

This book does not seek to investigate school leadership as such but seeks to provide an account of what can be achieved when leaders create school environments based on a 'culture of inquiry'. In more simple terms this book is an exemplar of what can be achieved when school leaders, teachers and their school communities focus their endeavours upon investigating and thus learning 'new things' and therefore informing school-based change through a culture of inquiry (Bell, et al, 2012; Hargreaves, 1996). Let us locate this idea in the teaching milieu.

Teaching, Research and Professional Development

Current education research is crystalizing around understandings that 'teacher quality' is the critical factor in the 'improving student achievement' agenda (Hattie, 2008; Dinham, Ingvarson & Kleinhenz, 2008; Lynch, 2012). Furthermore, this research indicates that within the school, the differences in teacher effectiveness are the single largest factor affecting academic growth of students and thus is a variance that needs to be extinguished for overall school effect (Darling-Hammond, 2000). In practical terms, John Hattie's (2008) meta-analysis indicates that students who have a confluence of effective teachers make significant achievement gains, while those who have ineffective teachers –two in consecutive years is all it takes--- lose significant achievement ground.

While much has been written on teacher quality and what constitutes its effectiveness in recent years, education systems have begun strategies to focus their school leaders to take active roles in improving the teaching of each teacher (see for example Madden, 2013b and Lynch, et al, 2014).

This is a direct move from the predominately corporate managerial role that principals had been forced into through site-based management reforms and the like during the 1990's onwards (Bloxham et al, 2015; Yeatman, 1993). For a school leader wishing to improve the quality of learning in their school, research indicates that collective early endeavours need to focus on professional learning. Two key questions predominate in such a strategy:

1. What does the teacher know and what can they do?
2. How does the teacher teach?

Returning to research into teaching improvement, studies indicate that it is not the school curriculum, the size of the school or classroom, or the demographics of students that determines the quality of student learning. Educational achievement is dependent upon the success of the TEACHing (Dinham, 2012; Hattie, 2008). With quality teaching being the most critical means by which to improve student learning and to close achievement gaps, the question is how to address these previous two questions? Our point is that it is all about teacher learning.

As Fullan states:

> "It turns out that blatant accountability focusing on tests, standards and the like is not the best way to get results. Rather, successful systems combine strategies of capacity building and transparency of results and practice. In these ways they get deeper de facto accountability. The public is assured by the vertical accountability of transparency, and the system generates greater lateral accountability because peers working with peers in a focused deliberate way provide both support and pressure to improve in measurable ways" (Fullan, 2011, p 8).

Fullan (2011) is firm in his belief that teachers must be learners themselves if they are to be effective in teaching their others. He asserts that what happens 'between' the traditional professional development workshop is where the real teacher learning takes place. By this he means a series of parallel discussions and engagements that teachers have with their peers in such workshop contexts that gets them thinking about their own practice. In effect what happens in such contexts is that teachers become embedded in 'relevant knowledge' and thus begin to reflect and locate it within their own circumstance as a teacher. Interaction with peers effectively creates the required trigger for engaging with what has been taught (or to be learnt). But as research into teacher professional development indicates this 'learning effect' wanes if such 'workshops' and 'learning sessions' don't connect directly with (and then get consolidated into) the 'work' of the teacher when back in their classroom (Cordingley, et al, 2005, 2003; Doe, 2014, 2013). The challenge is to create embedded learning, which is enmeshed in a culture of inquiry (Bell, et al, 2012; Desforges, 2003). The premise of 'action research' captures such a strategy (Doe, 2015, 2014, 2013).

The primary purpose of action research is to produce knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday nature of their lives. Three particular characteristics of action research are that it:

1. arises from practical questions;
2. is participatory in nature; and
3. its validity is strengthened through peer examination and discussion. (Bartlett & Burton, 2006, p. 401)

It is thought that Kurt Lewin conceived the concept of action research as a cyclic phenomenon (Dickens & Watkins, 1999) built on the traditional scientific paradigm with the results being expressed in 'if/so' propositions.

Stringer (1996) offers an ecological lens to view action research. In short it refers to a three step method as explained:

- <u>Look:</u> Gather information related to what is most valued to the goals or the work of the school.
- <u>Think:</u> After identifying relevant assumptions and expectations, analyze/interpret this information to evaluate possible antecedents, cultural and theoretical assumptions, ideologies, influences, consequences and potential actions.
- <u>Act:</u> This part of the cycle often involves posing new questions that lead to further inquiry. (Stringer, 1999)

This is explored in greater depth by Freebody (2003) who views action research as a 'deliberate' rather than a purely exploratory entry into a naturally occurring educational setting. That is, it is a planned and self-consciously focused examination of changing practice and has a number of components. For Freebody, a key characteristic of action research is that it is a solution-oriented investigation aimed explicitly at understanding and solving particular problems rather than simply documenting their instances, character or consequences.

Freebody (2003) has presented a seven step action research process:
- Selecting a focus
- Collection of data
- Analyse, document and review data
- Develop analytical categories
- Organise data and its interpretations
- Take action and repeat cycle.
       (Freebody, 2003)

This action research can be either be conducted by a group or personally owned by the classroom teacher. However, the emphasis here is on the importance of the researcher's role in defining the problem, what counts as solutions, and what form the reporting of the project will take. The central component of this action research is the 'loop' factor. This takes the form of a series of iterations on and around the problem, its documentation and theorization, and the analyses that are used to display how it has been redefined and solved. For some, these iterations are referred to as spirals (Stringer, 1999) but are more commonly known as the Action Research cycle. This cyclic feature of Action Research and its enabling through collaborations with other teachers is taken to be central to its core emphasis on the documented improvement of practice.

As teachers share their practice and involve themselves in small-scale inquiry, they in effect become the centre of knowledge production in the professional context of the classroom and the larger school improvement agenda. It's not just about following "others" learning from research, but moreover, using their own site-based research to enhance their decision-making as it applies directly to the context of the classroom. It is in effect the profile of what all professionals do as they engage with the complexity and dynamics of their clients and their work profile more generally (Desforges, 2003; Doe, 2014, 2013).

Consequently, there is much consensus in education between researchers and practitioners that teacher leadership is a powerful vehicle for school improvement (Doe, 2014, 2013; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). In acknowledging the crucial role teachers play, we provide an opportunity to recognize and value the teacher research occurring in schools to bring about improvement of not only student learning but also our understanding of educational processes and practices. The question for this book is what does this type of teacher inquiry yield?

The Teacher as Researcher Agenda

This book will be of great support to leaders and teachers around the globe as they enact a culture of teacher inquiry. This book integrates various insights from experienced educators where the professional dialogue mandates that teachers go beyond simply sharing practice but rather investigate their practice (and even whole of school practice) in order to bring about positive changes to bother their teaching and student learning. As you peruse each chapter, (although not necessarily in the order presented) we hope that the reader will not only learn from the experience of fellow practitioners but also find inspiration to be a *"teacher as researcher"* and trial a small scale research project of your own.

As you will have now gleaned, the 'teacher-as-researcher' construct comes to mean a vehicle for enacting school and, to be more specific, 'teaching' improvement. Through its inquiring approach into 'what's happening in each classroom', the associated processes encourage teachers to become investigators and to ask questions and thus seek answers. Furthermore, not just accept what occurs, but to strive to improve upon it; to set benchmarks from which to also make such judgments. Whether it's about revising curriculum, improving the work environment, de-privatising teaching and learning or by a simply yet focused asking of *why students are not achieving as expected*, such research is, in effect, concerned with the everyday practical problems experienced and thus important to the individual teacher.

As the push for evidence-based practice and increased teacher/school accountability intensifies, the facilitating of the 'teacher as researcher' becomes an effective and sustainable way for school leaders and their teachers to effect change in classroom practices, increase student achievement, and collect appropriate measurement data to validate it.

Book Outline

The chapters within this book showcase a richness of education practitioners implementing an evidence-based approach to teaching and learning and leadership in schools. Our central point is

that improving student learning and moving from a 'good' to 'great' to 'outstanding' school position relies upon an orchestration of a number of key things, but important for this book, the effective use of student performance data to guide whole of school decision making and the associated teaching strategies. How one goes about deciding what program or what teaching strategy gets used has historically been at the whim--- by this we mean without an evidence base to support it--- of the individual class teachers or based on education department bureaucrats who "tell" the teacher what and how they should teach. Concerning also that no end of commercial publishers also fill voids in the teaching world by presenting all manner of books with endless activities to keep students 'occupied' under the guise of the 'latest' education fad: most with questionable or nonexistent evidence.

The chapters that we have included in this book showcase a growing phenomenon of research-based teaching practice. It in effect the book acts an as exemplar of what can be achieved when teachers research their own practice.

Chapter Two introduces the reader to leading the outstanding school with Dr Bruce Robinson's critique on the required leadership. Incorporating the need for leaders to be innovative and creative and to develop an improved capacity to adapt to changing circumstances, Dr Bruce explores what one needs to be a leading learner. Based on his experience in schools within Australia and in five international schools, his chapter argues the need for the Head of School (lead learner) to engender a collaborative school culture and offers some tried and proven strategies to achieve the goal.

As signaled in Chapter Two, the need for a new educational leadership paradigm has arisen. Roma Bhargav, an experienced teacher leader explores in Chapter Three, an instructional leadership model introduced to build teacher capacity. She outlines a process to strengthen and build the capacity of subject heads and co-ordinators. Using an instructional leadership model Roma identifies what will help improve teacher learning practices across a K-12 learning environment.

From this leadership focus we centre on two key exemplars in Chapter Four and Chapter Five. An illuminating chapter from Elisabeth Davies (Chapter Four) showcases how graphic organizers can be used for closing the gap between students reading and writing skills, not only in her science department but across all subject disciplines. This chapter demonstrates the impact of collaborative decision-making practices needed to embed and sustain school improvement strategies and how an action research approach can add value to the professional learning of all staff.

Likewise, following the action research processes adopted at Dar Al Marefa Private School, Chapter Five by the Head of English Rizwan Khan, outlines the process of developing and introducing a school improvement strategy. Coined the Stepped Writing Model, Riz provides an outline of how using an action research approach can lead to the development of a specialized process to meet the targeted needs of the students.

Dan Hammond's and David Lynch's Chapter Six on exploring the premise of teacher's use of student reflective practices offers insight for educators wishing to be more student centred in their teaching. In introducing the need for teachers to undertake reflective practices Hammond and Lynch offer guidance to improving teacher performance through aligning teaching practices to individual student nuances as guided by the analysis of student reflections.

Chapter Seven describes the way that a Whole-School Benchmarking of Writing (WSBoW) approach implemented at a school has impacted upon teachers and improved their practice. Stephanie George's study was focused on school plans to improve the teaching of its teachers in the area of student writing and demonstrates how action research can produce significant gains in both teacher and student learning.

Outstanding schools meet the needs of all students. As Chapter Eight unfolds, you will follow the process of building an inclusive school as shared by Dar Al Marefa's Head of Primary, Naira Hamdy.

The role parents play in creating the outstanding school cannot be underestimated. Cathy Quinn (Chapter Nine), in capturing the research from the literature, has provided a succinct framework for school leaders to use to involve parents in the learning process. Her insight will help the reader unpack the key ingredients to engaging parents and offer some parent engagement strategies that will benefit all school leaders.

Hesham Metwalli, in Chapter Ten, proposes a practical solution to the challenges facing the Arabic language education, through introducing an internationally benchmarked curriculum based on international best practice in language acquisition and learning. His chapter sheds light on the current regional and global challenges facing Arabic language education. Hesham provides insight into international best practice in language learning and curriculum design that can guide leaders in the bilingual international school setting.

Instructional leadership is the heart of success in Maree Garrigan's work presented in Chapter Eleven. Case studying the journey of a successful primary school principal in Australia's Northern Territory, Maree draws on what the literature purports as successful qualities of principal leadership to the explain the events of the case study school. These qualities include their external awareness and engagement, their bias towards innovation, their personal qualities, their vision and expectations and the climate of success that results from this, their emphasis on teacher learning, their trust of staff, and their focus on student support, common purpose and collaboration and the fact they are all geared to the facilitation of student achievement.

In Chapter Twelve Mamta Bhanot, Head of Maths at Dar Al Marefa Private School demonstrates how her department implemented practical activities to engage and motivate students. With the goal of using targeted strategies to get the students interested to learn Mathematics, this chapter gives insight into producing meaningful and effective student centered lessons.

A final word

Not often do teacher practitioners 'stand tall' to give voice to school improvement. Educators, across all sectors, will find this book a gold mine of school-based strategies to develop the outstanding school. This book is more than just a summary of good practice; it is a roadmap for school leaders and educators who are looking for support to create their outstanding school.

It is within a need for a job embedded approach to professional learning that the genesis for the 2015 Dubai International Education Conference was formed and the creation of this book heralded. Knowing that teachers learn best from engaging with other teachers working (learning) in the same environment, the opportunity to allow teachers to share their practice and learn from each other arose. Teachers teaching teachers underpin the professional dialogue needed to propel schools into high performing learning institutions. The process of teacher improvement and therefore, improvement in student learning, is not about implementing standardization and accountability measures but rather enabling teacher collaboration and creativity.

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