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Professional education for teachers in Qatar for epistemological transformation in educational knowledge

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Background

Background

This paper is a progress report of the first phase (September 2009 – June 2010) of an innovative action research professional education programme for teachers in Qatar, involving approximately 100 Qatari teachers, senior staff and administrators, and a core team of seven UK education providers, including four tutors from Higher Education contexts. The project was born from a recognition by the Qatari government of an over-dependence on natural resources for economic wellbeing, and a need to develop a robust knowledge economy (see Al-Sulayti 1999). The Qatari Supreme Education Council therefore initiated plans for whole-scale teacher education reform (e.g. SEC 2010a), involving advice from international organisations for delivery of programmes. In 2009 the Tribal Education UK group was appointed main provider. The focus of the project therefore became how to prepare, deliver and evaluate a teacher professional education programme to position teaching as a high-status research-informed profession for improving the quality of learning for students and teachers. A main strategy was to reconceptualise the epistemological base of teacher professionalism, from a focus on propositional knowledge to person-centred relational knowledge, accompanied by a shift in dominant pedagogies, from the transmission of information, to student-centred enquiry-based learning. This idea is also manifested through the Qatari National Professional Standards for Teachers (SEC 2010b) that position teachers as critically reflective practitioners who will produce new knowledge for 21st Century education.

The trajectory of the project developed exponentially, with potentially far-reaching implications for regional and even international models for research-based professional education as the site for the development of a new epistemology for educational knowledge and its influence for social and cultural transformation.

Research Questions

Focus of the enquiry

The enquiry focused on ongoing evaluation of a research-based professional education programme for teachers, and the experience of participating teachers and providers working collaboratively. The methodology used was self-study action research (McNiff and Whitehead 2006), involving all participants' engagement with questions of the kind 'How do I/we improve my/our practice?' (Whitehead 1989). A key feature emerged that all participants worked collaboratively and offered critical feedback on practice to one another (see Somekh 2006). Consequently, the project was marked by a focus on collaborative knowledge creation, and the stringent testing of the validity of knowledge claims, and the demonstration of cultural empathy through the use of empathetic resonance (Whitehead 2009) and empathetic validity (Dadds 2008).

Methods

Research methods/mapping the literature

The aim of the project was to enhance quality in teacher professionalism through action research, and to enable teachers and providers to produce their descriptive and explanatory accounts of practice in the form of their living educational theories (Whitehead 1989), to show how they hold themselves

accountable for their work. A main focus of the work of teachers, reflected also in the international literatures, was on care for individuals and the nurturing of individual capacity (see DES 2003). The project emphasised the values base of teaching and learning (see Vision and Values in Teaching and Learning website: <http://www.becal.net/lc/teachingandlearning/teachingandlearning.html>) and the need to develop enquiry-based learning in schools (SEC 2009).

Frame

Analytical/theoretical frame

The emphasis on self-evaluation by teachers and providers, as well as objective evaluation in the form of regular evaluation schedules of workshops by the teachers, and in-project evaluation projects, emphasised the importance of ensuring quality through methodological rigour (Furlong and Oancea 2005). A key aspect of the project therefore was on testing the validity of emergent knowledge claims, by understanding values as living criteria and standards of judgement, as these emerged and were clarified through practice (Whitehead and McNiff 2006). The ready engagement by the Qatari teachers with these ideas concerning establishing quality in educational research has led the providers to link with York St John University in exploring the possible higher degree accreditation of the teachers' learning from the programme. Such links establish unforeseen benefits of the project through the development of university-business partnerships to support the professional learning of teachers.

Research findings

Contribution to knowledge

Significant aspects of the project are (1) its collaborative research base, involving the self-study of UK university-located providers and of Qatari schools-based teachers; (2) the potential influence of the project for new thinking and practices in professional education in Arab states and beyond; (3) the reconceptualisation of the epistemological base for teacher professional education; (4) the development of university-business partnerships for the accreditation of professional education programmes; (5) the development of inter-cultural understanding through research-based professional education, which may in turn contribute to new understandings about the need for cultural empathy in professional education and its potential contribution to international understanding.