

The Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process Experience: A New Culture for Professional Learning

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Abstract

The generation of professional capital, viewed in terms of social capacity building, has an important learning dimension. Teachers' staff development is one area which can contribute towards social capacity building and socially committed teachers have an important part to play in generating capital for their profession. This paper provides a critical review of current professional development processes in Malta with a focus on how different provisions are successful, or limited, in generating further knowledge and professional learning. It also discusses the need for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) which capitalizes on practitioners' experiences, realities and the knowledge of the social context of learning. Research data, in the form of teacher narratives and one longitudinal case study, reveals the importance of the social dimension in CPD. The involvement of teachers in the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process marks a proactive stance in teacher professional development and transformation through its emphasis on teacher networks, partnerships and externalizing teachers' knowledge base. It also demonstrates that teachers' professional capital can be fostered when teachers learn together and collaborate.

Keywords: teaching profession; teacher knowledge; inservice teacher education; Malta; teacher effectiveness

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La experiencia del “Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process”: Una nueva cultura para el aprendizaje profesional

Resumen

La generación de capital profesional, vista en términos de construcción de capacidad social, tiene una dimensión de estudio importante. La formación del profesorado es un área que puede contribuir a dicha capacidad además de promover profesores socialmente comprometidos. Este artículo proporciona una revisión crítica de los procesos de desarrollo de diferentes corrientes profesionales en Malta, con especial atención sobre cómo diferentes acciones son acertadas o tienen un alcance limitado en la generación de conocimiento y de aprendizaje profesional. También se pone de manifiesto la necesidad de un Desarrollo Profesional Continuado (CPD) centrado en la experiencia, la realidad y el conocimiento del contexto social. Los datos de la investigación, en forma de narraciones del profesorado y mediante un estudio de caso longitudinal, revelan la importancia de la dimensión social en el CPD. La participación de profesores en el Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process evidencia una postura proactiva en el desarrollo y transformación profesional del docente a través de redes de colaboración, lo cual pone de manifiesto que el capital profesional de los docentes puede ser promovido cuando éstos aprenden juntos y colaboran.

Palabras clave: profesión docente, formación del profesorado, Malta, eficacia del profesorado, formación durante el ejercicio profesional

Introduction

This paper will explore professional learning experiences, particularly those which build on teacher networks, together with their shared values, norms and understandings, that facilitate cooperation within and amongst groups of teachers. Our driving argument is inspired by Putnam’s ‘Bowling alone’ metaphor (1995, 2000) wherein he urges the development of a social capital which facilitates cooperation and mutually supportive relations in communities and which would be a valuable means of tackling issues and problems inherent to the particular community (Putnam, 2000). Burt’s (2000, 5) argument will further inform our discussion. He explains that connections which people have, in terms of trusting relationships and support groups, render a social capital which, for certain individuals or groups can create a competitive advantage in pursuing their ends. Social interactions and relationships help to make accessible information, ideas and support to those members involved in the network structure.

Although teaching is a social profession, teachers are often forced into isolation, through the fast nature of their work and the lack of opportunities which arise for them to collaborate and to construct a professional community in their school. The human, cultural and political dimensions in schools rarely allow the bringing together of teachers to engage in reflective, collegiate and experiential interaction that is increasingly considered as the basis of effective professional development (Parrott and Riding 2002, 1).

We shall thus commence this paper with a brief discussion of the individualistic nature of the teaching profession and the gains that teachers can make when they form teacher communities. This is followed by a critical review of current in-service training provisions found in Malta. The strengths and limitations of such provisions, in terms of how these address teachers' professional capital, are briefly discussed. Then we shall explain how a local in-service teacher education and training (INSET) initiative, namely the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process, utilises teacher networks in order to strengthen the practices of teachers engaged in differentiated instruction. This learning process also aids in teacher transformation through knowledge gained from individual and collective resources and strengths. We shall conclude this discussion by proposing ways of how INSET initiatives can capitalise upon, and generate, teachers' capital.

A solitary profession

Teaching is a solitary profession. Teachers spend most of their time isolated in classrooms with their students (Anderson 2004, 114). As Shulman (2004a, 505) argues, there is probably more, and indeed a distinctive wisdom about teaching among practising teachers than there is among academic educators. Yet, this wisdom is isolated and unvoiced. Teachers work in lonely circumstances and it is difficult for them to articulate what they know and to share what they have learned with others.

The principles of collective rationality are indeed called for in a profession whose demands are so great for any one teacher to succeed as an individual. The range of talents required are too broad and varied and the requirements for learning from experience exceed the capacities of an individual learner. It is difficult for any teacher to monitor her/his performance with great accuracy; to act critically, decisively and self-correctively under conditions that do not promote or support these processes (Shulman 2004b, 324).

The individualistic nature of teaching and the lack of the social dimension preclude it from improving its efficiency by facilitated coordinated action (Putnam 1993, 169). This coordinated action can develop when teachers work with one another, scaffold each other's learning and help each other to question actively, critically and reflectively. Teachers can supplement each other's knowledge when they collaborate (Shulman 2004a, 515); however, although the principle that teachers be given

opportunities to learn from others is highly laudable, there are few facilitating structures, and even fewer incentives, for those who seek to collaborate. Oftentimes teachers are not afforded opportunities for authentic professional collaboration.

One of the most effective ways to promote professional collaboration is through in-service teacher education and training. During this learning process teachers can become aware that they form part of a professional community, a community that can nourish itself from the wealth of its own practice and experiences, both as individual resources and as collective experiences. We believe that if these professional communities are not nurtured, then teaching will continue to be doomed to professional stagnation and to limited critical reflection. As Carney comments (2003, 423), independent forms of behaviour place profound limits on deep, extensive and widespread professional growth.

Not all professional learning processes manage to create the ambience and the adequate support structures for these communities to develop. What follows is a critical review of the present in-service teacher education and training scenario in Malta with considerations of how the structure governing this provision is allowing or inhibiting the social dimension of learning.

The context

A review of INSET provision in Malta

INSET provision in Malta is of two kinds. Teachers can engage in professional education by undertaking post-graduate courses organised by the University of Malta and the various institutions which offer distance education opportunities. Options for further qualification have been significantly increased in recent years and a number of agencies for foreign universities, as well as academies and tuition centres for higher education, have mushroomed across the island.

Teachers also have the opportunity to undertake professional training offered by the two directorates within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment (Bezzina 2002a, 74), this entity being the main agent in providing courses for all teachers in state and church schools (Bezzina 2002b, 59; Bezzina, Bezzina and Stanyer 2004, 48). Teachers in independent schools may also choose to attend such training, but often training is organised for them by the independent school in question.

The INSET programmes on offer, by the directorates for education, tend to fall under a top-down structure and address issues mainly at the system level that principally relate to policy and government-initiated reforms, but also to curricular needs that education officers, employed by the Ministry, perceive the need of addressing. Training is usually held during the three days prior to the teachers' commencing of duties in September, or immediately following the closure of schools for the summer recess. However, there are also a number of training opportunities, on a minimal scale, offered throughout the scholastic year, together with occasional scholarships

and bursaries which teachers can pursue. These training opportunities are organised by the directorates for education, the Foundation for Educational Services and other training agencies at a local or European level.

A number of schools, and colleges, periodically decide to organise 'school-based' or 'in-house' training which is specifically directed to the teachers belonging to any one school or college and aims to address needs pertinent to the context in question. This autonomy in taking initiatives regarding training can help schools be more specific in addressing the particular needs of the school and staff. This kind of arrangement is in fact sometimes helping to increase the relevance of training to the teachers concerned and giving them the possibility to organise and provide part of the training themselves. Nevertheless, one must say that even when training is organised by the school itself, it often fails to use teachers' field experience so the learning experiences intended are not grounded in the lives of the practitioners.

The present structure of INSET provision is particularly effective in dealing with large populations of teachers. Indeed, a considerable number of teachers from all educational sectors receive training during a short period of time on an annual basis. Yet, notwithstanding the variety of training opportunities, teachers are still not sufficiently supported to address the several changes they are experiencing within their schools and classrooms. For instance, the new National Minimum Curriculum states that students should acquire a wider range of skills, greater flexibility and adaptability. Teachers of the different subjects and classes are thus expected to collaborate in the planning of projects centering around particular themes. They are also expected to deliver lessons taking into consideration the various levels and types of intelligence and attainment. However, despite the fact that teachers frequently express difficulties in acknowledging individual differences and in implementing inclusive policies, training in differentiated instruction is not being regarded as a national need.

CPD which promotes teacher collaboration

The new reform agreement between the Government and the Malta Union of Teachers, signed in July 2007, facilitates the possibility that teachers meet and discuss their work on a weekly basis (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment 2007, 32). However, a number of small schools are not managing to set up these meetings because of the shortage of teachers to replace those participating in the meeting. Moreover, the format of these meetings is often structured and follows a prescribed agenda, set by the head of school or college principal. We feel that this formality can inhibit teachers, to a large degree, from taking any spontaneous initiatives and from collaborating on common projects.

In our opinion, teachers should also be given the opportunity to meet a wider community of teachers than that within their immediate school context. At present, the only opportunity for this to occur is during a subject-based INSET course which is

organised by education officers of the relevant subject for a number of teachers from different schools teaching the subject. Hence, although one needs to acknowledge that some favourable steps are taken to promote the development of learning communities, schools are to search for new and wider ways which enable teachers to meet and develop quality experiences out of these meetings. These teacher meetings, rather than being an end in themselves, should be considered as part of a wider approach to support professional development. They should be seen as opportunities where teachers can teach others the strategies that have been successful with their own students. In accordance with Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2008, 227), we feel that schools should strive to develop networks of teacher communities (that go beyond the school or college in question) from these meetings.

Teachers' autonomy in CPD

Another aspect which is of concern in the present provision of INSET is that although efforts are being made for schools to become more autonomous, this is not always being reflected in the development of professional development programmes for the teachers concerned. Teachers are very often excluded in the decision-making processes regarding their training, and they are often subjected to forms of training which do not necessarily respond to their particular needs. This prescriptive approach does not encourage teachers to put forward their ideas and contribute to the learning process of their profession. If teachers' individual experiences are not externalised, it is all the more difficult for teachers to make use of them in their quest to build a professional capital for their profession. Although workshops are sometimes organised within these courses for teachers to discuss issues, the three-day format of training is too short for any teacher educator to succeed in propagating a sense of community within the group and urge its members to generate a collective knowledge base from the collaborative activities that take place. More often than not, teachers attending INSET courses do not get the chance to meet the same group of teachers in the successive years; this makes it all the more difficult for them to build relationships of trust and collegiality, and for the teacher educator to document any activities effected from this collegiality.

Does the present provision allow and promote professional capital?

Hence, the present training scenario is composed of large groups of teachers who are obliged, on an annual basis, to attend a training programme in the company of other teachers, who out of circumstance, happen to form part of the cohort. The design of these courses purports individualism because teachers are asked to attend solely on the basis of their respective duties/responsibilities within their classroom. Any opportunity to spawn further knowledge is largely lost because the lack of time, and format, of the training courses do not permit for this to be so. Partnerships between teachers and training providers are also rare occurrences. These collaborations need

time to develop and at present the huge lack of human resources that the directorates are experiencing signify that teacher educators provide the training and get back to the multitude of duties they are burdened with.

What follows now is an evaluation of a particular in-service programme which forms part of the local Education Directorates' provision but which strives to depart from the governing structure typical to the majority of INSET models found in Malta and which specifically tries to form cohorts of teachers who gradually build learning communities within their group and within their school context. We thus present the methods of study we have utilised to evaluate this CPD approach, together with an analysis of the data.

Methodology

The aim of this study has been to evaluate whether particular INSET provisions are being effective in cultivating teacher communities and networks that help to generate further teacher knowledge. The research has thus focused on two broad questions: Which are the right learning environments which enable teachers to meet and garner support from each other? ; Why do teachers feel it necessary to be part of a teacher community?

Data collection

The data collected regards one Continuing Professional Development process with which we are involved, namely the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process. In order to understand teachers' dispositions to the social aspect of this training experience we randomly selected sixteen narratives from a group of teacher journals collected over a span of two consecutive scholastic years. These narratives, or journals, consist of a series of accumulated written reflections and form part of the required portfolio that teachers construct throughout their training to document their learning. A longitudinal case study of another teacher who has participated in this programme and who has documented, over a period of five years, the impact that this has left on her practice, has also been utilised.

Confidentiality of these narratives has been retained and only the initials of the participating teachers accompany the excerpts we are including in this paper. The reason for this is primarily because teachers, during this training programme, often disclose of intimate and personal details when raising issues concerned with their role and identity as teachers. A professional rapport based on trust is gradually built between the trainer and the group of teachers; this offers the adequate space for such reflections to be externalised. Nevertheless, teachers often feel vulnerable in sharing their journals with a wider audience.

Data analysis

In our journal analysis we have examined the social and collaborative experiences in which teachers were engaged throughout their training. We have also evaluated what they claimed to have benefitted from these experiences and the evidence for learning propagated specifically from social encounters and teacher networks. We have also assessed examples of how teacher knowledge has been generated across the teacher cohort as a result of these social encounters. Our primary hypothesis has been that INSET which specifically addresses teachers' isolated practices, and attempts to develop teacher communities, is indeed a practice which aids individual teachers (their professional and personal concerns) and the teaching profession as a whole.

Discussion

The Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process

Before presenting the data, it is necessary to enable the reader to understand the way the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process is structured. The educational policy inherent in this learning process builds on a constructivist pedagogy as it respects teacher professionalism and identifies the need for developing effective and responsive learning methodologies. In contrast to some of the above examples, it attempts to capitalise on reciprocity, teacher communities and networks to generate further learning.

The Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process is one of the few currently available programmes which is organised during the scholastic year on a structured and sustained basis. One of the advantages of this arrangement is that teachers are exposed to a much longer period to the training involved, and the teaching community that accompanies them during the training. Once the training sessions come to an end, they can choose to be mentored for the subsequent scholastic year in order to be supported in their new endeavours and any alternative practices they may want to carry out. This increases the course's effectiveness and the likelihood that what has been achieved through collegial interactions will not end abruptly once the course is concluded. Mentoring and other support structures are highly appreciated, as the following comment demonstrates:

After the last course I attended, I tried to do something new at our school and put forward some ideas from what I've learnt, but I felt discouraged by some of my colleagues as they said they preferred staying the way they were than apply new techniques; but as this course (the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process) was offering mentoring and help, I realise that finally something is going to be done.

(R.M. Secondary School Teacher, Session 5)

In line with constructivist thinking, the training programme does not depart from any policy-initiated or institutional imperative imposed by the directorates of education. The learning objectives are continually evolving to meet the current challenges experienced by teachers. The aim of the training is to support teachers in differentiated instruction, but teachers start by defining their own needs, because although the learning objective applies to all teachers, the learning needs are pertinent to each individual teacher who attends. Hence, as far as possible the training is customised to each participant, who, together with a trainer, marks the priorities set to be achieved and works towards gaining the necessary skills to adapt to present and future challenges. The quest towards customising the professional development experience contrasts sharply with what teachers are usually subjected to, in other training programmes.

Although the role of the trainers is crucial, this does not render that of the teachers a participatory one. Teachers do not merely work in groups and do role plays. The whole training programme is devised, and developed, with the agreement and contribution of all the educators involved. This is in accordance to what Shulman (2004, 514) claims, that authentic and enduring learning occurs when the teacher is an active agent in the process. Teachers need to experiment and inquire, to write, to engage in dialogue and in questioning. Professional development should provide teachers with these opportunities and with the support required for them to become active investigators in their own teaching.

Shulman additionally stresses that teachers need to become reflective about their work, yet also admits that the nature of their work and conditions make it very difficult to do so, and they also lack an adequate discipline in documenting their practice. This makes it all the more important for teachers to team up with colleagues, who can help them observe or monitor their own teaching behaviour, thus transcending 'the limitations of one's own subjective recollections' (Shulman 2004b, 324).

One of the measures adopted by the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process in this regard is that of teachers documenting their reflections in a journal and sharing these thoughts in groups. This exercise is an interesting and engaging experience and teachers can become aware of common challenges and dilemmas, and support each other; additionally, teachers are also asked to develop assertions about their practice as a result of this sharing. The outcomes are qualitatively different from mere acknowledgement and support (though important in their own right). During these journal-sharing sessions, teachers develop ways in reconsidering their experiences and attempt to make sense of them. They start questioning individual practices, in the full knowledge that the teacher community they now form part of can buttress their hesitance with the wisdom collectively nourished:

Now that I have gained this insight I think I can be more understanding, more flexible, and hopefully more patient as a teacher.

(D. F. Primary School Teacher, Session 5).

A collective learning experience

The data has revealed that teachers reach common understandings and also derive a sense of ownership from the whole process because future reflective practice is enhanced through these new perspectives they collectively conceive (Loughran 2002, 38). As the following observation from a secondary school teacher demonstrates:

I have started communicating with students in the way I have seen teachers doing on the DVD. I am also reflecting a lot. I have started observing the way I react, and whether my reactions are helping me become a good teacher.

Doing this course through online learning is not a good idea. Interaction among teachers is fundamental; you get to understand different scenarios and others' ideas contribute to help one address problems.

(M. C. Secondary School Teacher, Seminar 2)

Dogancay-Aktuna (2006, 280) speaks at length about teacher development processes which integrate the reflection-oriented approach and are grounded in teachers' exploring and reflecting on their classroom experiences. It is stressed that reflective practice should also devote attention to the socio-political role that the teacher possesses, an approach derived from critical pedagogy. Teachers, as transformative intellectuals, are expected to be socio-politically conscientious and empower their learners.

In line with this argument, we feel that a teacher's socio-political role needs to be extended to the teaching profession of which s/he form part. Thus, reflections and problem-posing activities within the training process are also intended to prompt understanding of behaviours. Teaching, as an activity, forms part of a larger cultural, discursive or ideological order and teachers need to be made aware of the global context of their work and how their local knowledge can contrast sharply with various other approaches to pedagogy. A critical awareness aids them to see, and respect, the broader social, historical, cultural and political contexts of teaching and learning. It also aids them to develop transformative learning activities that broaden learning environments beyond classroom walls. As one primary school teacher comments:

Hearing about the experience of a teacher employing the Let Me Learn strategies was a real eye-opener for me.

(D.M. Primary School Teacher, Session 2)

Having said that, it is difficult to expect teachers to engage in critical questioning, when many teacher education programmes still appear to focus on the subject-theory and methodology, at the expense of preparing teachers with political awareness. During the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process, we often receive mixed feedback from teachers at being exposed to a dose of critical pedagogy which has often been absent in past training. While teachers express relief at having

attended a course which empowers their thinking and enables them to become articulate and questioning of their surrounding realities and social roles and responsibilities,:

Above all this course has taught me how important it is to stand back and assess myself as a teacher. I discovered that I needed to change my attitude towards my students.

(D.F. Primary School Teacher, Session 5)

they also often find it difficult to embark on this journey. As Shulman points out, this requires scheduled time and substantial support (2004a, 514).

Generating collegial relations

The narratives we have analysed demonstrate that the discussions and workshops, which are organised during every training session, help to develop a collective reality which draws the focus away from the individual teacher's tribulations to a realization that collaboration can contribute to each other's success. In the same way, the individual teacher's realities are juxtaposed against a collective experience and one teacher's strengths become the strengths of the whole group. So, apart from the fact that collegiality helps teachers to find respite from their isolated work lives and discuss professional matters, the professional community established helps to maintain quality teaching practices because teachers are empowered to adopt teaching methods through collegial relations. The following excerpts from teachers' journals illustrate this point:

What I liked most in this seminar was the experience of a primary school teacher attributing the Let Me Learn with the Year 3 class. Her belief in the process has started to convince me that it can really work in practice after all.

(D. F. Primary School Teacher, Seminar 2)

I found myself telling others how to go about it because I had lots of ideas, which I knew were good. I hoped others would pool in ideas so that I would widen my perspective and gain more ideas myself.

(E. F. Primary School Teacher, Session 1)

Effective approaches are developed in the training with the intention of drawing on shared knowledge. One approach which seeks to accumulate teachers' wisdom is the externalisation of tacit knowledge. Each teacher has a wealth of wisdom, a tacit knowledge base which is largely unexposed and not articulated. The Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process continually seeks to expose this knowledge and to

generate its wisdom to the rest of the community. Teachers' journals document the benefits of this approach:

Together we started to learn from each other ... I learnt a lot from the people around me. The sessions I attended were important as we learnt from one another.

(C. S. Primary School Teacher, Session 5)

The first step in the externalising approach is a deconstruction process which enables the teachers to appreciate their valid practices and recognise any alternative practitioner knowledge which is worth receiving. As Whitehead and Fitzgerald (2006, 43) maintain, the act of teaching is not amenable to finite mastery and new and alternative understandings can emerge from within practice, both for themselves and their trainers.

This generative approach is sustained by the trainers who are committed to disseminate teachers' practices, hence helping to systematise the knowledge that is gained over time. Teachers are given the opportunity to connect to bodies of knowledge developed by other teachers and receptive spaces are created for this knowledge to be experimented with, questioned and sustained in future mentorship sessions. This climate of openness and trust could only be made possible because the training is spread along a number of weeks. This gives the trainers, and the teachers themselves, the chance to act as critical friends by sharing professional knowledge and engaging in dialogue to inform different ways of thinking and acting.

Narratives have also shown that an effective professional development experience builds on a relaxed, non-threatening environment which makes social interaction possible:

The group is very small compared to other courses I attended and this was a sigh of relief as it gave us a better opportunity to discuss and share ideas better.

(C. Z. Secondary School Teacher, Session 1)

Being seated in an informal manner, with everyone facing each other, made it quite easy for us to get involved.

(D. F. Primary School teacher, Session 2)

Another approach implemented in this training process with the intention of generating further learning is the developing of teacher networks. As Bidwell and Yasumoto (1997 as cited by Uekawa, Aladjem and Zhang 2006, 2) maintain, the intense interaction with colleagues makes teachers more prone to collegial influence and persuasion. Communication is facilitated in activities in which teachers work together and collective beliefs and trust among group members are reinforced (Friedkin 1998; Lin 2001 as cited by Uekawa, Aladjem and Zhang 2006, 2).

The research data demonstrates that effective collaborations indeed help to improve practice and increase professional accomplishments. In the journal entries, teachers report that thanks to the interactions nurtured within the training, they were able to improve the quality and effectiveness of their teaching practices. Unfortunately, such collaborative encounters are not always possible within the school, as one teacher reports:

We had time to work and talk with other teachers. I must say that at school we hardly ever have time to collaborate with our own colleagues.

(E. S. Primary School Teacher, Session 5)

Another example of effective collaboration is found in the longitudinal case study which forms part of the research data. This study reflects that the teacher undertaking the training succeeded to impart her knowledge to the rest of the school. While attending for the training sessions, she took the responsibility of informing her colleagues of new ways of engaging with her student (suffering learning difficulties); she also held meetings with the leadership team during which she discussed new practices and proposed actions which were not necessarily congruent with the usual directives reserved for students in similar situations. The school environment was totally supportive and conducive to the new practices that this teacher was proposing. The knowledge gained by this individual teacher succeeded to be extended to the rest of the professional team. A common language was created and the whole group of teachers started to employ common strategies with the mentioned student.

This latter example has enabled us to make a number of observations. We have realised that flexible grouping of teachers is very important, because while it is beneficial for educators from different schools and levels to come together and expose themselves to different experiences, it is equally important to form groups with a commonality of purpose, as this often provides an impetus for the community in question to take action. As Yasumoto, Uekawa and Bidwell (2001 as cited by Uekawa, Aladjem and Zhang 2006, 2) point out, teachers' interactions can improve the quality and effectiveness of certain teaching practices, which in turn can affect student achievement. This signifies also that the stronger the social relationships among the teachers in a school, and the more committed they are to collective goals, the greater is the gain in the school's mean achievement.

Furthermore, the organisational factors particular to each school can either facilitate, or impede, progress toward a professional community. Promoting collegiality among teachers is not enough if this is not sustained by the schools within which teachers work (Uekawa, Aladjem and Zhang 2006, 2). The leadership style of the school and the approach taken to school level change are two of the several issues that influence the degree to which the professional community is achieved. Throughout our experience we have come into contact with a considerable number of schools, most (if not all) of which are burdened with time constraints that work against the

possibility for teachers to attend training, to meet and to collaborate. Yet the difficulties primarily lie with the school culture, rather than with organisational and material issues. As Scribner et al. (1999, 154) argue, some school cultures are incongruent with a professional community because the set of shared norms and values, the focus on student learning, the reflective dialogue, the deprivatisation of practice and collaboration are lacking. By contrast, others manage to become communities of learning because they recognise the importance of teachers' continuing development as being essential to the maintenance and the raising of standards of pupil progress and achievement (Day et al. 2003, 246).

The advantages of mentoring

We additionally believe that a system of mentoring and co-teaching which forms a substantial part of the training structure is helping to generate collegial relations among teachers. Besides the fact that mentoring contributes to the effectiveness of the programme, as has been mentioned previously, the generative approach that the trainers take to mentoring takes into account the contextually specific knowledge and insights of teachers whose practical actions and values are integral to the formation of their own professional knowledge, identities and competences.

This epistemological base for professional learning is not premised on the traditional hierarchy between mentor and trainee. Although it is acknowledged that the mentor has the responsibility to train and support the trainee, s/he does not assume the role of an expert. New learning opportunities are recognised which do not necessarily include an identified body of professional knowledge, or competences, prescribed by the mentor. All partners are actively involved in the formation and reformation of the knowledge base of the profession. Professional knowledge emerges from reflective dialogue between mentors/trainers and trainees (Whitehead and Fitzgerald 2006, 40).

This undoubtedly requires that the relationship between the trainers/mentors and trainees is characterised by mutuality and co-development; a relationship premised on trust and respect for each other, open-mindedness and a desire to listen to alternative sides and consider alternative possibilities. Hence we try to ensure that the professional development practices within the Let Me Learn Professional Learning process are inclusive and democratic. Teachers repeatedly refer to this democratic relationship in their narratives:

I did not think it was going to be that friendly. The trainers made me feel relaxed.

(D. M. Primary School Teacher, Session 1)

The trainer co-plans the lesson s/he would be about to observe with the trainees, enabling them to become genuine stakeholders in their own professional development. Such a process empowers both trainers and trainees to consider

themselves as creators of professional knowledge, enhances their learning and contributes to the learning culture of the school.

In order for the mentoring to be generative in nature, it is equally important for the schools concerned to offer their support. When schools recognise the potential of this approach in supporting the further development of teachers, they create opportunities for the trainees to meet their mentors on a regular basis. On the other hand, the reality in other schools is such that most of the curricular decisions taken serve to constrain the practices of mentors (and experienced teachers) and limit their scope to generate and share their professional knowledge with other teachers.

Experience in the professional development field has taught us that there are often positive outcomes to be gained when teachers undertaking training are teamed with more experienced teachers in their school. This is made feasible in those schools which include teachers who have in the past undergone training in the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process. As Whitehead and Fitzgerald argue (2006, 38), novice teachers can gain more access to 'practical classroom knowledge' and there is a bigger likelihood of teacher-centred knowledge to be created. Such a model contrasts with the more static model of knowledge created by researchers, applied in a linear way by teachers and in turn, disseminated to trainees.

This socialisation process of co-teaching has been effective in transmitting tacit knowledge and skills from teachers/trainers to other teachers. The narratives witness multiple examples wherein the trainees themselves create new learning experiences, because the structure of this CPD process is flexible enough to permit teachers to make important choices regarding their work. Teachers find this empowerment liberating, especially if they work in contexts which hardly allow them the opportunity to take decisions and be participant in their own teaching experience. As one frustrated teacher explains, the restrictions that she is increasingly experiencing in her work are inhibiting her from conducting her work in a professional manner:

Unfortunately, I don't feel I have the right environment as regards to space and resources. Moreover, I feel there is lack of support from those who keep disregarding our professionalism by imposing their new ideas without seeking our input. I feel that I used to be a better teacher when I had time for discussions and flexibility to conduct my lessons. Now we are made to rush through everything so as to achieve the set targets. This pressure is hindering me from working to my best potential.

(C. S. Primary School Teacher, Session 3)

Conclusion

In order to sum up this discussion we shall now briefly outline a number of factors, already explored, that are related to the effectiveness of professional development processes in generating further professional learning. As the critical review of present INSET provision in Malta demonstrates, most of the approaches to professional

development do not deliberately draw on teachers' tacit knowledge and experience. The social dimensions of learning and the possibilities for social regeneration and capacity building are not sufficiently exploited. The way the training is structured does not allow for any relationships of collegiality and trust to be developed with the trainers and the rest of the teachers; moreover, training is often disconnected from real teaching experience as teachers are not given the opportunity to experiment and return with feedback, or receive support. The training objectives and knowledge imparted do not originate from the teachers themselves and more often than not, these reflect policy directives which are not necessarily congruent with the challenges teachers are experiencing at present.

In contrast, the way the Let Me Learn Professional Learning Process is structured and conceived affords teachers the space to critically deconstruct their practice and think differently about their engagement in education with a view to providing a socially empowering education. The learning process is built around activities that help the teachers to experience challenging situations in teams and reflect about them. Role-plays are held featuring situations of possible conflict and teachers are thus given the opportunity to externalise their frustrations, problematise them and define the process. Teaching successes are also replayed in front of an audience and through mentoring and co-teaching, it is ensured that valid practices are made public and repeated. Furthermore, the training sessions permit strong empowering social relations to develop, with the ensuing benefit that these relations can well and truly generate further wisdom to the profession.

Nevertheless, we recognise that the training programme, on its own, is not enough to induce transformation. As Shulman (2004, 515) maintains, authentic and enduring learning works best when the process of activity, reflection and collaboration are supported, legitimated and nurtured in a community or culture that values such experiences and creates many opportunities for them to occur and to be accomplished with success and pleasure. Hence, teachers must be provided with facilitating structures to work with one another and the entire school community should be committed to a collective set of goals. Only in this way can a professional development process be said to be contributing to the generation of capital within the teaching community.

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