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Personal Reflections on the Importance of Continuing Professional Development for Teaching Staff in Private Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This reflective paper considers the importance of continuing professional development at all stages of a teacher's career and at all levels of education. The author uses her career in Traveller Education in England as a case study. She describes how action research played a large part in the development of a distance learning scheme for fairground children. Analysis of the challenges presented by the scheme resulted in further research into the development of independence in the learner and the recognition of the need for teachers and teacher educators to use active learning methodologies and to have professional development opportunities to develop these skills. The author draws parallels with her work in Ethiopia between 2002 and 2004 on the TESO programme, where in a different context there are similar issues. Here too, she makes the case for encouraging student centered teaching and continuing professional development in Higher Education Institutions. Finally, particular importance is given to peer discussion within the process of professional development, which will lead to greater quality assurance.

Introduction

This paper records a reflective journey that I have made as a teacher, a trainer and a researcher in Distance Learning, Independent Learning and Teacher Education in England and Ethiopia. It covers a period of almost 30 years, which has been a time of continuing professional development for me. At the beginning of my career in education I was a teacher of English and Cultural Studies, in secondary school, art colleges and as a tutor for the Open University. But in the mid 1970s I moved into what we call Traveller Education in England.

Let me explain what I mean by this term, 'Traveller Education', as I suspect it is unfamiliar in Ethiopia. In England we have a number of groups of people who live nomadic or semi-nomadic lives. They are not nomadic pastoralists as you have in Ethiopia, but people following various ways of life and operating businesses that make it necessary for the families to move regularly from place to place. For example, there are the Gypsy people, originally from Northern India, some of whom maintain a traditional nomadic way of life. They live in trailer caravans nowadays pulled by vehicles and provide goods and services to local communities around the country. There are circuses, independent businesses that travel from place to place presenting shows in a large tent, called a Big Top. The show usually consists of highly skilled acts of juggling, acrobatics, wire walking, clowning and so on. Sometimes there are performing animals. Then there are fairgrounds. Groups of families travel together with mechanical rides (like the small one by the Ghion Hotel swimming pool), entertainment stalls and other amusements. They build up the fair in a town or village and open it for a week or so. Then they take it down again and move on to the next place.

The Gypsy, Circus and Fairground families are all distinct travelling groups, separate from one another. But they all live in caravans and travel for their living. Also they share two reasons why education can be difficult for the children. They come as outsiders or strangers to local communities and this means that the settled people often regard them with suspicion. The Gypsy groups in particular experience this prejudice. Also the very fact of mobility, of travelling, makes school attendance and continuity of education difficult. So, when we are looking for educational solutions for these groups, we consider them together under the generic name of 'Travellers' – hence Traveller Education.

Most of the counties in England have a Traveller Education Service within the local authority. For over twenty years I was the head of one of these services in the South West of England, managing a team of teachers, training teachers, doing action research and

always continuing to learn myself. Then in 2002 I came to work in Ethiopia, in the Ministry of Education. So now you have a context for me.

A Case Study

I am only going to discuss the situation of one of the Traveller groups – the fairground people, or Showmen as they like to be called. Their particular travelling patterns, and the educational problems they caused, started me on the professional development journey I am describing here.

The fairground year traditionally goes like this. In the cold English winter months, say from November to March, the Showmen and their families live at winter bases. They park their caravans and vehicles in yards, called winter quarters, and the children attend school. The adults spend these months maintaining the rides and equipment and preparing for the next travelling season. A few weeks before Easter they leave the winter quarters and the children leave school. They go to the location of their first fair and build it up. All through the spring, summer and autumn months they move from place to place, building up the fair and taking it down. They spend perhaps an average of a week in each place until November, when they return to the winter quarters and the cycle starts again.

What does this mean for the children's education?
In my university education and teacher education courses there had been no mention of the needs of nomadic groups.

Action Research

In the 1980s, when I started working with the fairground people, I discovered that the only regular schooling their children had was the three months each year when they were settled at their winter quarters. I did some research among the parents, asking what education the

children had during the traveling season. Some said the children had no schooling at all. They helped with the family business. Some said they sent the children to school in towns where they stayed for as long as two weeks, although some schools refused to take them in. Some said they sent the children to school in every place they stopped, sometimes for only two days at a time, but they felt this was a waste of time. And the children didn't like constantly changing schools.One or two rich families sent the children to boarding school, but they didn't like the children being away from home.None of the parents were satisfied with the situation. They regarded the schooling the children had in winter as very important. This was the only real educational chance for them.

Next I interviewed the head teachers of the schools, which the children attended at their winter bases – let's call them the 'base schools'. They had no idea what happened to the fairground children after they left the schools around Easter time. Often they left without notice. The base schools had no contact with the families until they reappeared again in November. Usually the children had regressed in their learning and needed extra tuition when they returned. The head teachers had no idea how important their school was to each of the families, as they saw them for such a short period each year.

Reflection on the research and an action plan

This action research had taught me a great deal about the needs of this group of children. Also it had shown me that there was a clear job for the Traveller Education Service. We could help to bridge the communication gap between the base schools and the families. Also we could try to set up an education system that would give the children some continuity of learning during their traveling season.

A Distance Learning scheme seemed to be the logical solution, but at that time in England it was unusual for Distance Learning to be tried with school-aged children. It would be a pioneering educational experiment. The Traveler Education Service would work with the base school teachers during the winter months to prepare packs of work. The materials

would cover the work that the rest of the class would be doing in school while the fairground children were away. But they would need to be presented in a way that the children could understand on their own. The materials would have to be relevant and engaging. When the children left school at the beginning of their travelling season they would take the Distance Learning packs with them.

The Traveller Education Service, the school staff, the parents and the children would all have to co-operate closely if the scheme was going to work. Parents would have to give adequate notice of their leaving dates and the logistics for exchanging completed work packs for new ones would have to be worked out with them. The parents would also have to give the children time and space and support to do the work at home. The Traveller Education Service and the base school staff would have to devise methods for feedback and the Traveller Education Service would have to put in place some kind of mobile tutorial support system. This, of course, was in the days before mobile phones and e-mail were in common use. Over the next few years we worked to establish a Distance Learning scheme along these lines (DTES, 1992).

A continuing process of research, action and review

I, together with my team of teachers and the teachers in the base schools, learned an enormous amount as we developed our scheme. Our Higher Education Institutions had not prepared us for this kind of work.

When I came to Ethiopia I discovered that Distance Learning was well established in some private Higher Education institutions. So I know that you will easily understand the initial difficulties we faced back in the 1980s. Issues about the quality of materials, distribution, feedback and support will be familiar to you all. When you set up Distance Learning for adults you can generally expect that they will have motivation, adequate literacy skills and the capacity to be an independent learner. But in our scheme in England, we were dealing

with children who were not necessarily motivated. Many of them preferred helping on the fairground to doing schoolwork at home in the caravan. Their standard of literacy was often poor, as they had already missed a great deal of school time. Very few of them knew how to study on their own, without a teacher to refer to. We could not rely on any of the basic factors that help to bring success in Distance Learning.

In the Traveller Education Service we looked for solutions to these problems. In order to help with motivation we tried to make the materials as interesting and relevant to the children's lives as possible. We devised puzzles and games as supplementary activities. We included tapes and videos, although we could not rely on a regular electricity supply. The materials were prepared individually for each child, so that they would match the child's literacy level, though this made a great deal of work for the teachers. We shared experience with other Traveller Services across the country and, with European funding, published a guide for base schools (EFECOT 1995).

But how could we make the children more capable independent learners? Experience showed us that if the children went for more than three weeks without any feedback or some support from a visiting teacher, they were likely to give up and stop working on the materials. I tried to organize the work of my team of teachers so that they could visit the children on the fairgrounds regularly to give support. But this was not always possible as there were many other demands on the teachers' time. Also the families often travelled to other regions of the country. It was difficult for the parents to give academic support to their children, as many of them had had little or no education themselves. We gave the parents some training in the winter months about ways they could encourage and support their children with the Distance Learning packs (Kiddle, 1999 & 2000), but it was a continuing problem.

We needed to go back and look at how the children were taught in school. And we needed to look at how their teachers were trained in the Higher Education Institutions. Colleagues

in the North of England (particularly Angela Tierney, Durham and Darlington Traveller Education Service) did some action research on this issue. Looking at school practice in England at that time (and I think this is the same for Ethiopia now) it was clear that it did not prepare children to be independent learners. Far too much work and talking was done by the teachers. The teacher was the constant reference for the class. Without a teacher there, the children did not know how to organise themselves or how to approach their work.

The English National Curriculum is too much about facts and not enough about processes. If children are to be independent learners, they have to be taught how to learn. So it is important that teachers use active learning and student centred methodologies in school. Instead of simply teaching facts, teachers can show students how to find out facts for themselves using a range of resources. They can teach dictionary skills and demonstrate how to use reference books for research. These days, of course, this extends to gaining knowledge of and practise in how to use the internet. Teachers need to give students practical skills so that they can learn how to solve problems. A teacher can give a task to an individual or group of students and ask them to come up with a solution. The task can be either physical or mental, but the students must find their own way to the solution.

Rather than detailing the facts of some historical event, teachers can begin by questioning the students to discover their existing knowledge of it. Then they can facilitate a discussion about the event, allowing the students to think about their shared knowledge and start to develop an understanding.

Thinking and analytical skills are also best taught through student activity and discussion. Ideas can be generated about how to approach a given task and plan for its completion. The question to be asked if we want to encourage independent learning is not - 'What is the answer?', but 'How can we find this out?'

The role of self-assessment is also important for developing independence in the learner. The teacher can guide the student towards this by getting them to ask themselves searching questions. For example – 'Did I find a solution to the task?'; 'What were my difficulties?'; 'How could I get over those difficulties?'; 'What were the steps I took to reach the solution?'; 'Could I have done it more quickly/easily/efficiently another way?'; 'What have I learned from this?'; 'How will I change my approach next time?' Using questions such as these, the students will begin to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. They will begin to see for themselves what they need to learn to fill gaps in knowledge or understanding and to improve their performance. They will think of ways to approach tasks and how to plan their work.

We discussed all this with the base-school teachers during in-service training sessions so that they could help the children towards this approach to learning. In their own initial training in the Higher Education Institutions very little attention was given to these kinds of methodologies.

So, constantly evaluating, revising, trying again, reviewing once more in an ongoing cycle, over 20 years we gradually improved our Distance Learning scheme and also the skills of teachers, students and parents. We also built strong relationships between all involved. The whole development was a continuing action research project within our Traveller Education Service and contributed greatly to our own professional development.

A new context in Ethiopia – but similar challenges

Then in 2002 I came to Ethiopia to work with colleagues in the Ministry of Education on the TESO programme. I found that here, teaching in schools; colleges and universities were also very teacher-centred. The lecture method was the most common form of teaching. The Minister, then W/o Genet Zewdie, was looking at all levels of teacher training, education and professional development. She wanted to shift the profession towards adopting active learning methods and developing the problem solving capacities,

not just the memories, of students. So my work in Ethiopia, on the Higher Diploma Programme (HDP), the English Language Improvement Programme (ELIP) and Continuous Professional Development programmes (CPD) was all about encouraging active learning and student centred approaches by teachers in schools, in the universities and on the teacher education courses. Though the context was very different, the methodological territory was very familiar to me. We were all on the same journey. We all need to continue with professional development throughout our careers.

I have been talking, about Distance Learning and Independent learning and I have said that to achieve success in Distance Learning it is necessary to be a capable independent learner. This is certainly the case for adults as well as children. Our teachers at every level of the education system must show their students how to learn. But most of our teachers, both in England and Ethiopia, were not themselves taught how to be independent learners when they were at school. So how do we start? We need to break into this circle somewhere. My belief is that this has to be in the Higher Education Institutions, through professional development opportunities for staff and a focus on the methodologies, which are suitable to use in the teacher education and other courses. A private Higher Education Institution like St. Mary's University College runs both Distance Learning and Teacher Education courses and we can clearly see the connections between the two. We can see how important they are to one another. And how important continuing training opportunities are for staff. I know that the staff in St. Mary's and in other private Higher Education Institutions have been doing the HDP in the last year or two, so already they have started along this road.

Let us look again at Distance Learning for a moment. St. Mary's runs a large number of Distance Learning courses. Many of these are undertaken by serving teachers in order to improve their qualifications and to give themselves greater career prospects. What factors will determine their success in their distance learning courses?

First, the materials must be well prepared and presented, with clear instructions and layout. The content must be relevant and accessible. Visual and audio elements can help to add interest to the texts.Second, the distribution system must work – and this is obviously a major task in a large country like Ethiopia, with many communications difficulties. I know that a great deal of energy is spent here to make sure that the distribution system is effective.Third, a feedback and some kind of tutorial support system must be in place. Again this is a highly complex operation in Ethiopia, but the greater the support for Distance Learning students, the greater chance they will have of success. Because it is very hard to study in isolation. Everyone who has tried it knows this.

This brings me back to my former point and the fourth factor for success. Studying on one's own, by Distance Learning, is only possible if the student is or develops into an independent learner. Who enabled them, or could enable them, whatever their age, to be independent learners? Their original teachers - if they used the appropriate methodologies. Teacher Education courses may be run separately from Distance Learning courses in St. Mary's or other private higher education institutions, but in this sense they are closely inter-connected.

Conclusion

The quality of Teacher Education courses will ultimately affect the success rates of Distance Learning. One will support the other. If students are taught how to think and how to learn, they can take these abilities and use them in every situation where they find themselves. If we consider the skills needed by people undertaking Distance courses – the research skills, the practical and planning skills, the time management skills, the thinking and analytical skills, the reflective and evaluative skills – we will understand the approaches which the trainers of our teachers should follow. Enabling students to develop these skills is not only useful for success in Distance Learning. They are the core skills for

success in every field of activity. And not only students but also staff need opportunities to keep developing these skills.

Distance Learning, Independent Learning, Teacher Education – we use the terms in different contexts and often think about them separately. But I hope that this paper with its reflective journey has demonstrated the dynamic relationship between them and the real need for continuing professional development in Higher Education Institutions. I hope it has emphasized the importance of seeing and strengthening the connections between all these things. In conferences, such as this, colleagues gather together to look at aspects of higher education and have the opportunity for discussions on many topics. I urge that the synergies, the active connections between courses, are explored for their mutual benefit in the process of professional development. Discussions between colleagues, which seek to identify the elements of their work, which relate to each other, will always be fruitful. They will provoke developments, which in turn will lead to the assurance of greater quality in all departments.

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