Exploring the Use of Collaborative Inquiry in Improving Practice

Panayiotis Angelides
Kakiag@globalsoftmail.com

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Panayiotis Angelides teaches at Intercollege, Cyprus.
Correspondence: Kakiag@globalsoftmail.com

Introduction

Effective teaching in mixed ability classes has dominated much of the Cyprus government's agenda for educational reform. Since the publication of the UNESCO report (UNESCO, 1997) which pointed out that primary school classes in Cyprus are organized as mixed ability groups with no clear policy about internal grouping, no policy on differentiation in curriculum, methodology or resource utilization, the Ministry of Education and Culture began a campaign for improving teaching in mixed ability classes. Circulars setting out the advantages of this policy were sent to schools and senior officials of the Ministry of Education and Culture organized seminars to suggest effective ways of teaching in mixed ability classes. In addition, in the 1990's primary school teachers in Cyprus passed through two major in-service training courses. One in the early 90's to enable them have equal financial rights with the secondary school teachers and another one five years later in order to get a bachelor's degree, since most of them had a diploma in education. Among other lessons they were also taught how to teach in mixed ability classes. However, there remains widespread dissatisfaction with Cyprus teachers' ability to teach in mixed ability classes. As the UNESCO (1997) report points out, classes are engaged in whole-class activity using a single textbook with the teacher teaching from the front of the class using an expository mode.

Reflecting upon these efforts for developing better teaching, I will argue that an important factor behind these unsuccessful attempts for improving teaching in mixed ability classes in primary schools is the little attention paid to the method of supporting teachers, creating a gap between policy makers (those who decide what and how teachers should be taught during in-service training courses) and practitioners. This paper, therefore, suggests an alternative way for helping teachers improve their practice. In particular, it describes outcomes of a piece of research that points to some promising possibilities in terms of assisting teachers to develop more inclusive practice. Specifically, it argues that staff development and in-service training in Cyprus should be refocused with a view to collaborative models of inquiry. It proved to be successful in the context of the particular study that informed this article for helping teachers to develop their practice in mixed ability classes. At the end, this suggestion is supported with an illustrative example of working collaboratively. By the term 'collaborative model' I mean that part of action research that encourages teachers to scrutinize their own practice in collaboration with an 'outsider' (e.g. an inspector or an academic).

Teacher development in Cyprus

As has been already mentioned, in the 90's teachers in Cyprus undertook two major in-service training courses. The participation was very high because they were directly related to financial benefits. As long as a student teacher graduates from university and is appointed as a teacher in Cyprus he/she is under no obligation to attend any in-service training. The Pedagogical Institute that is responsible for teachers' in-service training organizes seminars but participation is voluntary. This kind of training follows the traditional pattern of staff development where teachers attend external courses. It promotes individual learning without connecting it directly to practice. Fullan (1991) argues that if staff development is to have a significant impact upon thinking and practice it should be linked to school development and the development of the staff as a team. Therefore, the current individualized ways of working for staff development in Cyprus seem to be inefficient.

In my opinion, a factor behind the unsuccessful attempts of the Ministry of Education and Culture to improve teaching in mixed ability classes is the little attention paid to the method of supporting teachers during in-service training. Although during the courses teachers work hard in the afternoons, studying and learning the different theories, teaching itself entails more than just theory. It involves practice as well. The school improvement literature, for example, describes effective teachers as being reflective and critical practitioners (e.g. Hopkins et al., 1994; 1998), these are qualities that it is difficult to develop by just attending a seminar or a conference. This creates the need for a different approach to teachers' in-service training.

There is indeed a suggestion in the research literature that there is a need to search for new methodologies in order to help teachers improve their practice (e.g. Hargreaves, 1996; Hopkins, 1995). Some authors see teachers as researchers (e.g. Stenhouse, 1975) suggesting investigation of practice as a basis for further development. In other words, this is about 'teachers who have extended their role to include critical reflection upon their craft with the aim of improving it' (Hopkins, 1993, p. 1). If teachers adopt a research stance, Stenhouse (1975) argues, not only can they develop professionally but they will also become more autonomous. Hopkins et al. (1994) argue that in our era of change, schools and classrooms have become more complex, so teachers need to continuously participate in professional development programs in order to be able to respond to the increasing demands of schools. These programs, they continue, should be school-focused because they move professional development "from being something 'in addition', to a part of the life of every teacher and every school" (p. 115).

Furthermore, other scholars propose certain 'outsiders' to act as critical friends to schools wishing to make a direct contribution to the understanding and improvement of educational practice (e.g. Ainscow, 1999). They see 'outsiders' working in collaboration with the 'insider' teachers for the purpose of improving practice. Therefore, teachers must work in their own workplace, reflecting on their practice in order to develop better teaching. In-service training should be carried out in schools and classrooms analyzing particular teaching incidents and not in amphitheatres where lectures in theory are merely heard. My suggestion is to follow collaborative models of inquiry for staff development where an 'outsider' (e.g. an inspector or an academic) works in collaboration with the 'insider' teachers, analyzing existing practices in order to develop better teaching.

Collaborative models of inquiry for staff development

In the research literature there are many examples of researchers who suggest collaboration as a means for development (e.g. Cowie and Rudduck, 1990; Lather, 1986; Reason, 1998). Ainscow (1999), for instance, who developed different collaborative models, analyses how these can be implemented. He first relates action research and reflection to collaborative inquiry, stressing that in such inquiries theory and practice "confront and question one another in an on-going dialogue" (p. 39). He worked in partnership with teachers aiming to understand difficulties experienced in schools from the points of view of insiders and to explore in collaboration with them how these can be addressed in ways that attempt to support the development of those involved. This process, Ainscow argues, can help teachers to develop understandings that can facilitate movement towards more inclusive practices.

A similar model could be used in Cyprus in order to help teachers develop better teaching in mixed ability classes. The Ministry of Education and Culture, therefore, could organize a staff development project where its inspectors (or academics) would work collaboratively with teachers in the classroom for improving practice. The practice of inspectors in Cyprus is confined to visiting schools to assess teachers and express the rhetoric of the Ministry of Education, although they often call themselves advisors. Furthermore, inspectors visit schools quite often (once a month approximately), so most of the times they have good relations with teachers. Of course, inspectors would be trained in order to be able to carry out this project. Thus, such a project would not only assist teachers to improve their practice but would also reduce the gap between inspectors and teachers. It would bring them together in the same classroom, working collaboratively to make schools more effective places. Furthermore, this collaboration would increase the degree of teachers' involvement in professional development programs since they would have leading roles in analyzing their practice. And most importantly, it would have an immediate and direct impact on classroom practice.

By following collaborative models of inquiry teacher development focuses on learning 'on the job', developing at the same time professional expertise in analyzing teaching incidents. Working in partnership with an 'outsider', who acts as a critical friend, the professional learning process takes place when teachers are able to examine and reflect on their classroom practices. In collaborative inquiry 'outsiders' are in a working alliance with practitioners. Theory (the 'outsider') is in a working alliance with practice (the teacher), so the traditional gap between outsiders (inspectors who are the policy makers or academics/researchers) and practitioners is now reduced. Thus, outsiders and practitioners put theory into practice and work out 'what works in theory' (Ainscow, 1999).

It is important at this point of the argument to stress the significance of the 'outsider' researcher, the person who acts as a critical friend to schools and teachers. In my experience (Angelides, 1999), despite the fact that increasingly teachers in Cyprus have masters degrees and in some cases doctorates, teachers appeared to need support when developing their practice. A critical friend can ask questions like: 'have you tried this (i.e. a different method)? Have you tried the other (i.e. a different way of organizing a lesson in order to respond to pupil diversity)? Of course, 'insiders' can ask similar questions as well. These kinds of questions can stimulate teachers to reflect on their practice, enriching their lessons by developing a broad repertoire of

teaching strategies, and making them feel that their superiors (inspectors) are not just evaluators, but people who work alongside them to provide more quality education. These 'outsiders' explain why some actions are effective and others are not, helping to invent alternative approaches where appropriate.

Moreover, this process provides an opportunity to pay attention to the detail, something that is missing from most teacher development projects in Cyprus, and challenges teachers to think creatively. As has already been said external courses do not provide direct connections to practice. In contrast, this approach not only helps teachers make direct connections to practice but also helps them investigate more deeply their teaching. In this way they can pay attention even to the little detail, and then, it is a matter of thinking creatively to reinvent something and fill in the gap.

Within my own research I have developed an efficient technique for working collaboratively with schools and teachers to improve their practice. It involves the study of critical incidents (Angelides, 1999; 2001). It is a technique by which certain 'outsiders' (e.g. inspectors or academics) collect, analyze and interpret critical incidents that have occurred in a classroom, and then, in collaboration with teachers from a school, explore how that interpretation could inform improvement efforts. This process has the potential to probe into the deeper level of social processes of a school and it can produce meaning for development in the particular research site.

In what follows I provide an illustrative example of working collaboratively with a teacher in a wider collaborative program, trying to produce some initiatives for improvements. During the year 1999-2000 I collaborated with a small school of 8 teachers and 115 pupils. After Christmas we decided to put into effect a collaborative research program in order to find factors that prevented teachers from including all pupils in teaching, given the government's policy of paying more attention to mixed ability classes. My role was to observe practice and collect examples of critical incidents, discuss them first with the teacher involved and then bring the accounts together with the emerging issues of these incidents and my interpretations to staff meetings in order to discuss them with the rest of the teachers (for a detailed account of how to collect and analyze critical incidents see Angelides and Ainscow, 2000; and Angelides, 2001). These issues were the points where emphasis was put during staff meetings in order to help teachers make connections with their practice and find factors that prevent them to provide equal opportunities to all learners. In this way, teachers can improve their teaching. A series of more than 50 lessons were observed and all eight teachers were interviewed. For the following academic year (2000-2001) I continued to observe practice, something that helped me to test, confirm or reject my initial conclusions.

A vignette: A history lesson

A fourth grade of 18 pupils sitting in groups of four or five. The history lesson is about ancient Greece and democracy. The teacher, Mrs. Alexandra, follows strictly the textbook although she has some group problems solving activities. The text is full of difficult terms and despite the efforts of Mrs. Alexandra to explain them the pupils seem to have difficulties understanding them. During the initial phase of the lesson, the children were looking at Mrs. Alexandra, each holding the textbook, and Mrs. Alexandra discussed the idea of democracy. She used questions

to draw out the main points of the text but the children seemed to have difficulties in spotting them in the text. Then, the children were asked to work in groups and to discuss the characteristics of democracy in ancient Greece. It soon became evident that most children had difficulties in contributing to the discussion. Mrs. Alexandra stopped them and continued teaching from the front of the class, using expository mode. During the forty-minute lesson only four pupils raised their hand to answer a question or to make a comment. In contrast, during the two previous lessons I had observed in this class -a science and a Greek language lesson- all pupils talked at least once. All three lessons were planned following the problem solving approach.

After the lesson we discussed my observations trying to identify factors that underlay Mrs. Alexandra's actions. During the discussion we reflected on the work undertaken paying particular attention to the use of the textbook. I mentioned the way in which she had chosen to use the book in the lesson, trying to stimulate her to think about possible changes to her practice that would facilitate the learning of all children. In this way, the discussion moved to a consideration of various tactics used in mixed ability classes. Mrs. Alexandra brought onto surface a numerous issues that we analyzed through our discussion. Using these issues as a central framework we finally arrived at the following conclusions:

- The curriculum as it is presented in the textbooks is sometimes difficult for pupils to understand and for teachers to teach. For example, during the lesson reported above only four pupils raised their hand to participate. In such cases we can insert in the textbook pre-structured lesson, modifying it by setting obtainable aims and simplifying the language and the exercises.
- Previously, as Mrs. Alexandra reported after the above lesson, she had sometimes prepared extra work only for the high achievers who finished first. Discussing this issue with her asking the same time questions about the other children we reached the conclusion that where possible we can make appropriate exercises for the low achievers as well.
- Mrs. Alexandra said that she tried to teach the above lesson quickly, just to cover the curriculum, because this is the policy of the Ministry of Education and in order not to get in trouble with her inspector at the end of the year. We agreed that it was bad practice and we should avoid it.
- The above history lesson was organized on the basis of the textbook. Discussing this issue with Mrs. Alexandra we concluded that lessons should be organized at the level and abilities of our pupils and not on the basis of textbooks.
- At the end of our discussion we concluded that we should not take anything for granted but we must scrutinize our practice looking always for alternative and more effective practices.

In addition to the above issues, Mrs. Alexandra pointed out that the inspector's philosophy (that teachers have to cover the curriculum set by the Ministry by the end of the year) influenced her approach to teaching, although her beliefs were different. As she noted, she was afraid of having a dispute with him about this issue and so she followed his ideas. Talking with the inspector he confirmed that he required from his teachers to have as their priority the coverage of the curriculum.

This process of collaboration helped both of us to reflect critically on our practice, and at the same time, it helped us understand many school factors that prevented Mrs. Alexandra in engaging in alternative teaching action. Mrs. Alexandra recalled a number of early experiences

in her career that facilitated us to reflect in detail on aspects of our practice. During one of our meetings Mrs. Alexandra commented on our collaboration and pointed out that I provided an important resource in terms of research expertise:

I enjoyed our collaboration despite the fact that at some stages of the project I was very anxious and disappointed with the improvement of my practice I don't know if I could ever do this sort of research without your help. Without your collaboration and without your understanding of what was going on we wouldn't be able to reach the conclusions we reached. And these conclusions were the basis on which I grounded the improvement of my teaching.

Three months after the above discussion, Mrs. Alexandra and I had another discussion in an attempt to find out how our collaboration influenced our practice (if it did so), focusing in particular on the above themes. During this discussion she raised some interesting issues. Here it must be noted that these issues were part of the development of our thinking during the research program and arose as a result of the analysis of a series of lessons and extensive discussions with the rest of the staff. The issues were as follows:

- The participation of Mrs. Alexandra's pupils, and the low achievers in particular, increased significantly, surprising her sometimes.
- When pupils do not participate she asks questions on existing knowledge in order to revitalize their discussion.
- After a question, she gives more time for pupils to think.
- She scrutinizes and gives reasons for all of her pupils' actions, especially when they misbehave.
- She became more patient when results do not show up immediately.
- She became, to use her own term 'expert' at modifying lessons.
- She feels more satisfied than previously with her job because she managed to help those pupils that previously thought she was unable to assist them.
- The atmosphere in the classroom is happier because she does not put too much pressure on pupils.
- She reflects critically on her practice.
- She discusses her practice with her colleagues more often.

Working with Mrs. Alexandra for the following year I many times witnessed the above issues in practice. Therefore, I could support them with my observations. I found this model an efficient means for teachers' professional development. It is also efficient in terms of having an immediate and direct impact on practice and in terms of preparing the ground for the success of new innovations. It appeared from my observations that Mrs. Alexandra, as well as other teachers who were involved in the project, had developed better practice in teaching in mixed ability classes. The other teachers, and Mrs. Alexandra in particular, supported the view that our collaboration had helped them develop techniques for more quality teaching in mixed ability classes. Furthermore, they made clear that our partnerships that included planned opportunities to observe classroom practice followed by discussion can be powerful in creating a stimulus for professional development. Mrs. Alexandra said in particular:

I think that this collaboration was very important for me and for the school as well. It has forced me to think differently; it has forced me to reflect on my own practice and rethink issues I previously took for granted; it has forced me rethink my practice and it convinced me that my

teaching practice has to be changed. And I think a lot of the other teachers were benefited from our discussions These discussions, and your interventions in particular, helped me to clarify my thinking and I believe, I would have spent a lot of time attending seminars to learn what I have learned from this collaboration It helped me to take a step back and look at my practice; it helped me to see the wood through the trees.

This school-based program promoted reflective practice at the level of the group and individual because teachers were asked questions on their practice. One of the purposes of the study was to encourage teachers to study aspects of their own practice. The significance of this for my own learning was that as I was helping the teachers to reflect on their own practice I was also reflecting on my own (Lanzara, 1991). In my notes I commented on what I described as a 'unique experience for me'. In particular, I noted that I felt I had been learning about ways of working in collaboration with practitioners, developing methods and techniques for approaching and helping them to feel comfortable and reflect freely on their practice. In addition, the discussions I had had with the teachers, and Mrs. Alexandra in particular, had helped us to reflect in detail on aspects of our own thinking and practice. In this sense, this experience demonstrated the value of collaborative inquiry because it gives opportunities to observe practice and to participate in detailed discussions of the shared experience.

Of course, these findings come from a very small project in only one school. However, they seem to be positive and they might be of significant importance for the Ministry of Education and Culture that is interested to prepare teachers improve their practice in mixed ability classes. At the very least, it expands the range of available possibilities for teachers' in-service training.

Concluding remarks

This paper, criticizing the existing orientation of staff development in Cyprus, has suggested a change in direction towards a different model. It suggests that instead of providing lectures to teachers expecting them to develop better practice, staff development projects should employ collaborative approaches where outsiders work together with teachers in examining and analyzing teaching incidents. This process seems to enable teachers to understand teaching situations, evaluate the effectiveness of their actions and recommend alternative approaches to improve practice. In this way teachers develop professionally.

The professional growth of teachers presupposes a process, which supports experimentation and reflection, and provides teachers with opportunities to consider new possibilities (Ainscow, 1995). Considering that we are in an age where we try to 'reinvent professionalism' (Hargreaves, 1999), my point is that when there is no inquiry and reflection on classroom practice and when staff development projects are based on external seminars alone, teachers seem to fail to be effective, especially in mixed ability classes. When teachers work in collaboration with their inspectors or university people, their morale goes up and they feel themselves to be better professionals. All teachers involved in the above collaborative project emphasized that they would feel themselves to be better professionals if their inspectors came to school and worked along side them in analyzing classroom practice. Therefore, I propose collaborative models of inquiry as an appropriate form for successful staff development in Cyprus. Working collaboratively, influencing each other (Huberman, 1999), 'outsiders' and practitioners can make

sense of teaching situations in schools, which in turn can help all involved to develop better practices.

Collaborative inquiry does not seem to stop here. In my opinion, there is room for new collaborative techniques for assisting the professional growth of teachers. Working collaboratively and searching at the same time for new collaborative techniques is a process of culture building in the educational environment of Cyprus. The basis for this environment will be a working alliance between outsiders and practitioners. Given the dissatisfaction that prevails with the effectiveness of classroom practice, I hope that this study will encourage educators and policy makers in Cyprus to use collaborative models in order to design projects for staff development.

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