The impact of Action Research in Middle Eastern education contexts

Lauren Stephenson and Barbara Harold, Zayed University

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of Action Research as a methodology and tool for teacher and leadership professional learning in a context of educational reform in the Middle East. The strengths and challenges of its use in the government sector, private sector and graduate educational contexts are described and analysed. The process of Action Research was complex and multilayered and included various aspects of change such as reflection, collaboration, adaptation, site based problem solving, communication, logistics and individual and collective learning.

The impact of Action Research clearly proves its value through the documentation of best practice and simultaneously it works to improve educational practices (Kember, 2002). It recognizes that Action Research is a powerful tool for addressing specific themes in practice, and attitudes and dispositions in the education profession.

Keywords: Teacher Professional Learning

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates are embarking on a wide-ranging reform of their education system, that aims to move classroom practice from a predominantly teacher-directed and exam-driven system to a more student-centered one based on varied methodologies and integrated with modern technology. Through implementation of workshops and seminars, the Zayed Professional Education Centre (ZPEC) at Zayed University is charged with helping teachers and educational leaders towards this goal.

This paper describes and evaluates three ongoing Action Research professional learning projects in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The programs use context specific frameworks based on the principle of cascading situated learning and implementation arising from an initial program in collaboration with the UAE Ministry of Education K-12 schools. The researchers’ ongoing experiences with action research have led to a focus on a specific approach or model whose strength lies in the belief that the most effective professional learning is collaborative in nature, grounded in specific professional concerns and should be based as much as possible on site. The model supports the idea that change is long-term in nature and takes time. Relatively little evidence exists, particularly in the Middle East, of the actual processes involved in a sustained program based on this model. Furthermore, relatively little information exists on collaborative research between educational researchers and teachers using such approaches.

The authors will discuss the impact of action research as a methodology and tool for teacher and leadership professional learning in a context of educational reform in the Middle East. They will also discuss the outcomes of these projects and discuss the successes and challenges that arose. The process of action research was complex and multilayered and included various aspects of change such as reflection, collaboration, adaptation, site based problem solving, communication, logistics and individual and collective learning.

The following questions framed our experiences and guided our thinking about what was happening during the learning process and its evaluation:
• What was actually happening?
• How were the different participants engaging with the programs and the learning associated with it?
• How were the ZU faculty team engaging with the programs and the learning associated with it?
• What did we need to do next?

A reflexive approach formed a key part of our own thinking and learning. As we developed our model, using this approach, the following additional sub-questions guided our thoughts, analysis and interpretations:

• How does leadership affect learning?
• How does communication affect learning?
• How does the nature of each professional development program affect learning? (This is what drove the changes).

**Action Research as a Model for Teacher Professional Learning**

A range of continuing professional development models have been suggested in the literature on teacher professional development and learning including training, award-bearing, deficit, cascade, standards-based, coaching/mentoring, community of practice, action research and transformative (see Kennedy, 2005). These models are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. In this paper, action research is used as a model for teacher professional learning. Given that it has been common for over twenty years there are several definitions in the literature:

*Action Research is simply a form of self-reflection enquiry undertaken by participants in a social setting [including educational settings such as schools] in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own practice, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situation in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis, 1983).*

*Action research is systematic...self-reflective inquiry by practitioners to improve practice (McKernan, 1996).*

*Action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the “actor” in improving and/or refining his or her actions (Sagor, 2000).*

For the purposes of this study action research is defined as “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it” (Elliot, 1991). Both the participants’ understanding of and practice within the situation can define the quality of “action”. Although it is claimed that the kind of collaboration found in a community of practice is not a necessary prerequisite for any action research model, proponents of this approach to professional learning (Burbank and Kauchack, 2003; Coghran and Brannick, 2004; McNiff and Whitehead, 2002; Sagor, 2000; Weiner, 2002) tend to suggest that it has a greater impact on practice when it is shared in communities of practice (CoPs) or inquiry.

There has been increased interest in recent years in the concept of the school as a ‘learning community’ (Du Four and Eaker, 1998) and on ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) and the notion appears to offer new perspectives on how teacher professional learning might become more effective. A community of practice is referred to in the literature as a group of individuals with different roles and experience engaged in common practice (Brown and Duguid, 2000; Clancey; 1995). Individuals become involved in communities of practice, which embody certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learning, from this point of
view, requires developing the disposition, demeanour and outlook of the practitioners, rather than merely acquiring information (Brown and Duguid, 2000: 26). According to Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), as newcomers move from the periphery of a community of practice to its centre, they become enculturated. That is, the more active and engaged they are with the culture, the more they can assume the role of ‘expert’ (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) call this process ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. Clancey (1995) summarises the community of practice analytic framework as follows:

Knowledge is the ability to participate in a community of practice. Learning is becoming a member of a community of practice and tools [for carrying out socially organised activity] facilitate interaction in a community of practice (Clancey, 1995:55).

The Projects

Zayed University’s Professional Education Center (ZPEC) is closely involved in supporting individual and collective learning of teachers and administrators in local schools, and has moved to a Development/Improvement model of teacher professional development (Stephenson, 2004; Harold & Stephenson, 2005), which engages teachers in problem solving and thinking about learning, inquiry and self-assessment, curriculum design and helping activities such as mentoring and coaching. Such an approach supports the provision of continuous and cumulative professional learning experiences over time, is responsive to teachers as developing adult learners and aims to transform teachers’ conceptual understandings of teaching and student learning. In our model we have deliberately made collaboration an essential component because we believe learning occurs in a social context. At the heart of the matter is the work and experiences of educational leaders and teachers, and much more needs to be known about what constitutes effective teacher learning in the professional development context. With this in mind, the three different projects sought to describe and evaluate the evolution over time of our professional development model.

1. A Government Sector Project

Phase One (Fall 2002)

The development of our model for the Ministry of Education (MOE) through ZPEC was a fruitful partnership that evolved from an initial more traditional university based Action Research course for fifty Ministry of Education Curriculum Supervisors across all curriculum areas. However, the focus was too theoretical and participants did not complete actual action research projects. Participants were mixed Arabic and English speakers and thus understanding of the material was varied. Translation facilities were limited and the translator did not have expertise in educational research and content. Translation of materials was time consuming and sometimes incorrect. This led to some concerns about the overall of the value of the course as a professional learning tool and because the participants had not actually practiced action research the Ministry of Education asked for an extension of the course so that this could be accomplished. Two College of Education faculty reviewed the practices and continued the process using an improved approach.

Phase Two (Spring 2004)

The second phase was for the same group except for the English Supervisors (total of thirty five Supervisors). It introduced some different practices. First, an education graduate was employed as the translator and worked in a team with the faculty to prepare the materials. The extension program was limited to weekly sessions over ten weeks and the focus was on development and
implementation of a small action research project based on the real problems and challenges occurring in their professional work with teachers. In this phase, ‘faculty experts’ were still involved with introducing and prescribing material, which was then translated for the participants. Participants were asked to plan and implement their projects in small groups according to their subject specialization. The faculty and graduate assistant responded to questions and assisted them in this work. Following initial planning sessions the participants spent four weeks gathering data and the final sessions included data analysis, report writing and presentation of findings. All groups completed an action research project. However, once again some practical and logistical issues became apparent.

**Phase Three (Fall 2004-Spring 2005)**

Upon the completion of Phase Two the two faculty involved, together with a third faculty member, were approached by a senior English Supervisor who wanted the Supervisors of English (seventy five in total) to also learn more about action research and classroom based inquiry for use in their professional practice. He requested a full day workshop for each of the Dubai and Abu Dhabi emirates.

The faculty expected the development of the workshops to be relatively smooth at this stage and were somewhat surprised to be faced with some initial unexpected challenges which included: varied levels of knowledge, skills and experience related to action research; dissatisfaction with lack of previous practical application of an action research model; and some confusion about different research paradigms. Faculty analysis of these issues indicated that more than one day would be needed to satisfy participant requirements. They suggested two further full day workshops to follow the initial planning day to develop the action research project and instruments, that would include a data analysis day and a project presentation day. Phase Two content seemed appropriate and was retained, however this time the participants were provided with ongoing supervision and support as they planned and implemented their projects. This was done via meetings, phone calls and email and was made possible as everyone spoke English. This ongoing dialogue was supported by additional faculty with expertise in English language teaching.

Building on their experiences in the first two phases the faculty were now more focused on a specific professional learning model for teachers. This third phase now incorporated the following professional development and learning principles:

- The projects were grounded in the practical realities of participants’ work and drew on participants’ needs and interests.
- A team based approach to planning and implementation of projects was adopted.
- The focus was on small, manageable and achievable projects.

During a full semester more than seventy Supervisors participated in the program where they completed and presented 20 Action Research projects. Their reports were edited and presented to the MOE.

Following this program, during Spring 2005, the English Supervisors used a similar model to assist more than 2000 teachers in the UAE to develop their own Action Research projects in the schools impacting on several thousand students. The teachers presented their reports to the Supervisors and to the MOE which then selected the best projects in each Emirate. Ten Action Research projects were presented for special accolades and Zayed University faculty were invited to participate in the evaluation process.

An evaluation of the Phase Three program indicated that, as with Phase Two, there were high levels of satisfaction with the completion of specific projects and a growth in confidence among
the Supervisors that enabled them to try the Action Research approach in their professional work. The faculty team too, were satisfied with the positive outcomes that endorsed the improved professional learning model and fostered better practice in the classrooms.

**Phase Four (Fall 2005-Spring 2006)**

Soon after the completion of Phase Three the CPD was asked to conduct a similar program with Arabic-speaking curriculum supervisors from several emirates. Two of the faculty from Phase III (and a third faculty member) were invited to implement the workshops. Although the third phase had been very successful, the faculty team could foresee that some of the original issues regarding translation would again be problematic. Upon reflection and consideration of feedback from Phase III participants they decided to improve the current model further. Based on the learnings from the previous programs, the faculty argued for a new approach which involved:

- ZU faculty experts, the MOE and a team of bilingual (English/Arabic)lead Supervisors (chosen from those who had already completed successful Action Research projects) co-constructing the program
- Lead supervisors translating key documents and presenting information and facilitating the planning and implementation of Action Research projects with each responsible for two small teams of 4-6 supervisors.

Phase Four followed the same time frame as the previous phase and used the same ongoing support system as before which was made possible by the bilingual skills of the lead Supervisors. Once more all projects were completed and the final presentations were attended by senior members of the MOE who expressed great satisfaction with the outcomes. The project was also reported across the emirates in various media. Phase Four participants then continued to follow up the Action Research approach in their schools across the emirates. Overall, a total of more than 3000 individuals have benefited from the program.

2. **A Private School Project**

Another professional development program was requested by a local private Indian school with two campuses (one for male students (3000) and the other for female students (5000)) (Stephenson and McNally, 2006). The school was staffed by a largely Indian faculty (400 +) on short term contracts. The researchers had been invited to participate as trainers in the planning of this school-based approach to make changes in teaching and learning strategies.

**Phase One: The Initial Encounter**

The impetus for the project came from a meeting between one of the researchers with the school Principal in September 2003 when the idea of a sequential professional development program focused on *Cooperative Learning Teaching Strategies* was first discussed. The Principal had a clear vision of learning and he was willing to invest in teacher learning. He stated from the outset that he wanted the professional development program we were designing “to be connected to the school learning goals”. We proposed a professional learning model that encourages the development of communities of practice. He was open to the idea and more than willing to provide opportunities for teachers to work, plan and think together.

As a result of this meeting initial professional development sessions were co-constructed by faculty, school teachers and administrators in such a way that the outcomes of the total program could be clearly stated and measured to give direction to the improvement efforts. The school settled on *Cooperative Learning* and *Integrating Technology* as the two themes for professional
development. In this paper we report on the work of teachers implementing Cooperative Learning strategies as a vehicle for improved teaching and student learning.

Activities were designed around a central tenet that all professional development should be designed to improve students’ learning outcomes. The program examined the nature of learning and learners, key theories that underpin the learning process, and the role the teacher plays in motivating students to learn. It explored a range of cooperative learning strategies that teachers could use with their students. In particular the program addressed classroom interaction and questioning, grouping for instruction, critical thinking and problem solving and creating a positive classroom learning environment that encourages student-centered learning to flourish and be successful.

A number of Cooperative Learning workshops, and on-site visits (teacher observations and meetings) were held to support teachers in the field. The trainers acted as ‘critical friends’ working with teachers questioning assumptions and interpretations, but also supporting and collaborating. Participants were introduced to the concept of a professional development cycle where the responsibility for change shifted from the trainers to the teachers themselves as they developed communities of practice engaged in Action Research. As part of the professional development cycle they were encouraged to adopt a ‘community of practice’ component where selected teachers from the school were invited to participate as ‘critical friends.’ In effect, they replaced the trainers and began to take responsibility for their own and their peers’ professional development. The model’s strength lies in the belief that the most effective professional development is collaborative in nature and should be based as much as possible on site. The model also supports the idea that change is long-term in nature and takes time.

Presenting and modeling a more student-centered, cooperative learning approach to teaching and learning underpinned the whole program and the support process proposed by the trainers. Having negotiated the framework for the program, we introduced cooperative learning through groups, modeled it, looked at lesson plan exemplars developed by teachers and set up a process where participants could plan, teach, and evaluate their implementation of the strategies through Action Research.

Participants were also introduced to the key principals of a “professional learning community” and how they as adult learners could take control of how teachers and administrators could work together to build their learning community. We worked out with teachers and administrators how the process of observation, reflection and feedback could best be achieved for each individual teacher. We then participated in modeling the observation and feedback process with two groups of interested teachers with the aim of then handing the ongoing development of the learning community to the members themselves.

**Phase Two: The Co-constructed Workshops**

Phase Two was conducted from November 2003 to May 2004 and involved the delivery of Cooperative Learning Action Planning Workshops for four groups of 35 teachers (Grades 5-8; Science, Math, English & Social Sciences).

The message in the Phase Two action planning workshops was to encourage a collegial and collaborative approach to peer coaching and to embrace all forms of collaborative dialogue and planning as important parts of the improving cooperative learning strategies in the classroom.

Following the completion of the initial action planning workshops in September 2003, the Principal gave workshops to the teachers on writing lesson plans. We were also asked were asked to deliver a workshop on lesson planning and later invited to evaluate over 100 lesson plans that aimed to incorporate cooperative learning strategies. The lesson plans themselves indicated
that teachers were trying to incorporate the principles of cooperative learning however, there were several questions in the trainers’ minds regarding how these lesson plans would play out in practice.

As a result of this evaluation, the trainers suggested an alternate approach to further workshop sessions and confirmed a commitment from the school principal and program participants that they were willing to join a cooperative learning team. It was a voluntary process and the basis of the grouping was subject based, linked to a year level, shared classes, interests and/or friendships.

The senior leadership at the school responded positively to our suggestions for Phase Three and implemented the following suggestions:

- Consideration in terms of time or organizational support to assist teachers to observe each other in classrooms. Observations could be between once a fortnight and once a month depending on teachers’ teaching programs.
- The role of 8 nominated coaches in each subject area could focus more on facilitating and supporting designated groups as lead teacher rather than coach as expert
- Cooperative teams could be as small as 2 and as large as 5 or 6. There may be some pairings within the larger group
- Initial observation visits could be restricted to one-on-one or two-on-one visits but subsequently, it may be that teachers are confident to invite all teachers free at that time to come and observe the class. Nominated coaches might take the lead here.

**Phase Three: On-site Visits**

Phase Three was conducted in February 2005 and involved the observation of 8 teachers from the Middle School teaching Cooperative lessons to Grade 5-8 Classes (4 girls and 4 boys classes) as they implemented the strategies for cooperative learning that had been planned previously. Supervisors from the Middle School identified competent key teachers. The supervisors along with the headmasters for the morning and afternoon classes set up and facilitated the observation process. Their role was very important to the observation and feedback process and they were very effective and supportive of teachers and the researchers’ roles in the process. The trainers were able to debrief with both groups following each set of observations.

The teachers observed demonstrated a high level of competency with using the cooperative learning strategy in their classrooms and it reflected the level of shared planning and teaching using this strategy in the Middle School. This was evident in observing the students working in groups as well as observing the teachers’ role. The trainers were greatly impressed by the overall level of engagement of students in the learning process in all the lessons observed. Students seemed eager to learn, were motivated and articulate in their group and whole class discussions and feedback. Observations of cooperative group activities confirmed that students have learned a great deal about working cooperatively in groups. Not only did they show they could take on designated group roles (leader, recorder, timekeeper etc) but that they practiced the full range of group learning skills as they worked. This suggested that they have had considerable exposure to group processes and were able to work well to achieve group outcomes.

The trainers observed that learning objectives/outcomes often did not make explicit what were some of the cooperative (social) learning outcomes to be achieved. Furthermore, demonstration lessons sometimes result in teachers attempting to overachieve and include too many activities/resources in a 35 minute lesson. At times there were too many cooperative learning tasks / activities attempted in one lesson. There was a sense that some teachers were “rushing” activities and not allowing sufficient time for more in depth discussion /reflection by students in groups and in feedback to the teacher. Creating some opportunities for more individual work
would provide more of a balance between group and individual outcomes. The trainers also suggested that teachers consider getting feedback from the groups at the end of the lesson.

One shortcoming of the Phase Three process was the amount of time between the lesson observation and the feedback conference. What took place was useful but closeness to the presentation date was an important part of the sharing process. The fact that teachers had made their own written reflections helped the process as it occurred.

**Phase Four: The ‘Train the Trainer’ Phase**

Phase Four was conducted from March to April 2005 and involved those eight teachers from the Middle School previously observed by the trainers in a train-the-trainer role observing other teachers and providing constructive feedback on the lessons observed. In this second round of observations, one of the trainers and the key teacher co-jointly observed another teacher teach using a cooperative teaching strategy. This was followed by a three way debrief where firstly the key teacher debriefed with the observed teacher and then the trainer added to and reviewed the coaching process as a whole. The trainers aimed to set this up to occur within a day or so of the lessons, however this was not always the case due to external constraints.

The Principal and Supervisors were then left to foster the further development of the CoPs as the teachers continued to observe each other and hold monthly meetings to discuss successes and challenges when implementing innovative teaching strategies in their classes. The school’s aim was that all 140 teachers would observe each other in the following year.

One hundred and forty teachers were involved in the program in some way. Participants agreed to participate in the data collection and took part in individual and group meetings, and surveys to provide information about their specific understandings and needs in relation to incorporating cooperative learning strategies into their teaching. These data were analyzed and reported to the principal after each phase of the program.

### 3. A Graduate Education Project

Responding to Zayed University’s mandate for leadership development, the College of Education has recently introduced a graduate program for a Master of Educational Leadership. The first cohort has just graduated and the second cohort is halfway through their program. The first cohort comprised 24 students (19 women and 5 men).

**Phase 1: Coursework**

**Objectives**

A key component of the Cohort One program was a course on Action Research where the key objectives were to

- Identify, define and describe key elements of the Action Research model.
- Place this research model in a wider framework of scholarly inquiry.
- Compare and contrast international perspectives on Action Research
- Evaluate the use of Action Research as a tool for inquiry into leadership practice.
- Identify key issues in leadership practice that could be investigated using the Action Research approach.
- Plan a detailed proposal for an Action Research project that will focus on improving their leadership practice
- Identify, and critically analyze selected Action Research material
Assignments
Course members were required to read widely on the topic and engage in discussion and critical analysis of the course material. Their first task was a collaborative one where groups critically analysed an Action Research project from the literature and then presented their findings to the others. This aimed to develop a greater awareness of some specific issues and challenges in doing this kind of research. The second assignment required the students to compare and contrast between different proposal and report formats and aimed to further develop their understanding of the beginning and end points of Action Research. The final task was the development of a draft proposal for a specific project based in their work site. The draft proposal was discussed with their assigned academic supervisor to ensure it adhered to Action Research principles and methods and then the final format was written.

Phase 2: Implementing the Action Research Project
For their final Capstone course the participants engaged in an Action Research project. A wide range of projects were undertaken where participants did Action Research in their workplaces to investigate specific problems and develop their understanding of leadership skills. Projects included a variety of topics such as:

- assisting a principal develop her communication skills,
- professional development for library staff,
- investigating colleagues perceptions of effective leadership,
- helping teachers development time management skills,
- developing a learning organization approach in the workplace,
- introducing a reading curriculum innovation, and many more.

The projects were conducted under supervision by experienced university faculty for two semesters of the academic year.

A key component of the projects was ongoing reflection about the impact of the project on the specific participants together with analysis of the impact on the researchers’ leadership knowledge, skills and practice. Participants were encouraged to keep a regular journal log about their experiences and leadership learning and to include this as an appendix to their report.

Of the 24 Masters program participants all successfully completed their research projects and went on to successfully graduate from the program. However the path of Action Research was complex and often problematic as the participants worked through methodological and logistical issues. The reflective comments identified the challenges and successes. The journal entry of one summarizes very effectively the tenor of comments by many of the others:

*I learned that research means more than numbers, results, and recommendations. Action Research is about the researcher’s creativity, assumptions, personality, beliefs, and thinking, which makes [the] process very complicated and interesting at the same time. Honestly, I did a lot of traditional research, but all of it stayed in my drawer and no one benefits from it; but this type of research is different because you see in reality the results of your action, which makes you proud and this increases your belief in the benefits of research for people. In short, I can say that Action Research promises something a little different from other types of research which is a chance to study our own practices with an eye toward what worked and what didn't. In addition, Action Research challenged me to reflect and think deeply about every thing that I am observing in order to be able to explain it and use it in my research. Furthermore, Action Research experience motivated me to change my personal life, because helping other people to change and to improve their interpersonal communication skills encouraged me to use those skills in my personal life and with my family too. Finally, I want to say that I am always optimistic when I think about the future of education in UAE, and this...*
type of research made me believe more than ever that small steps or actions can make a huge difference (Lateefa, 2007).

**Action Research and change**

Across the three programs the process of Action Research was complex and multilayered and included various aspects of change such as reflection, collaboration, adaptation, site based problem solving, communication, logistics and individual and collective learning.

**Reflection**

Throughout each of the projects participants were regularly asked to reflect on the process of Action Research. Often this was informal where participants and the course teacher or project supervisor discussed issues in an unstructured format. At other times the reflection was more formal such as in the journals of the graduates. The reflection process is a critical part of Action Research as it allows the researcher to develop critical perspectives and awareness of what is happening in the process, both to the participants and to the researcher’s own learning and practice. In essence it is a dialogic process either internal, as the researcher reflects on and interrogates the data, or external with other colleagues. The development of this professional tool is an important process that leads to independence of leadership and research practice in the workplace. It was an important aspect of the graduate students work with their academic supervisors, and some of them used an external ‘critical friend’ to help them refine their thinking. Another advantage of reflection is that it gives ‘voice’ to the researcher as an active participant in the research and also to aspects of the research process that may otherwise go unheard or unexamined.

**Collaboration**

In the government and private school projects collaboration was essential as the scope of the proposed changes was large. An advantage of collaboration and teamwork is that it allows uncertainty, anxiety and fear of change to be diminished as the group works toward project development and completion. In the government project there was also limited time and resources so small group teamwork and collaboration made the implementation of projects and their supervision much more manageable and realistic. Success through collaboration meant that the Ministry Supervisors were more likely to feel comfortable about using this approach when they took responsibility for it in their specific schools. As the participants worked through particular Action Research projects the focus was on developing theoretical perspectives within a grounded practical framework. An important point was allowing for collaboration in the development and implementation of projects, as group activity and supported achievement is an important part of Arabic culture. Interestingly the element of competition and public recognition is also important in this cultural context, so the presentation of completed reports in the public domain was a key motivator for many participants.

Similarly in the private school project, using a collaborative approach was critical to maintain the integrity of the project which was concerned with cooperative learning. By using a collaborative approach, the teachers’ own professional learning ran parallel to the methods they were trying to develop in their classrooms. When motivated, competent individuals work together as a team toward shared goals, albeit with different perspectives, they are a powerful force in problem solving; usually much more than an individual (Kruger & Mieszkowski, 1998; Michaelson, Watson & Black, 1989). Work processes in the school had initially been largely individual rather than collaborative. However, as the private school program progressed, participants reported that they were more willing and more interested in working together in pairs, and teams. Towards the end of the second year, several CoPs had formed and were engaged in work and learning together.
Opportunities for collaboration in the graduate Action Research projects were less obvious, at least at the researcher level because current policy indicated that they should do individual projects. However there were opportunities for collaboration throughout the course, interacting as a community of practice, as they developed a critical understanding of Action Research but these did not really extend into the individual projects in the way that was hoped for. The participants did take a collaborative approach with their site-based projects but logistical difficulties impacted on the supervision teams that were originally planned. This was a basic weakness of the first cohort program and as a result there was a realization of the need for a programmatic review.

**Site based Problem Solving**

All three projects were site based which allowed for immediate addressing of needs as participants dealt with real educational and leadership issues in their work contexts in a manner that was consistent with best practice professional learning models. For the government and private school projects, dealing with issues on site led to understanding that the program was negotiated. This aspect was less evident with the MEd projects as the researchers were working individually rather than within project teams and some of the graduates did not have a current worksite. Many of them did base their projects on specific workplace problems, while others chose topics and then had to negotiate these at a new site.

The key advantages of site based problem solving lie in the opportunities for authentic research, shared decision making, ‘ownership’ of the problem and leadership. In addition there is more likely to be follow up. Decisions about sustainability lie with participants on site as through the Action Research process they become the ‘experts’.

** Adaptation and Issues of flexibility**

As the programs developed, especially for the government and private school projects there was a realization that both participants and program deliverers needed to be flexible – needed to negotiate the program, and have a higher tolerance for ambiguity to adapt to emerging situations. Although this was less so for the Masters program each cohort had to modify their projects to adapt to their local contexts and personal and community needs.

For example in the first phase of the government project, while the knowledge base of university faculty was appropriate, the delivery of the coursework was influenced by language and translation factors. The traditional course delivery simply did not work well in this context and so in Phase Two the faculty team adapted the program to fit more closely to the participants’ needs. More group and collaborative work based on real professional problems, along with more effective translation were introduced so that learnings were relevant and shared more effectively. The focus on shared learning grounded in real professional issues continued in Phases Three and Four and there was also an emphasis on co-construction of the Action Research projects by the faculty team and the participants, together with ongoing supervision and support between workshop sessions. This resulted in a high level of interest and engagement by participants. The level of participant confidence developed throughout the program was also important as it enabled participants to take their learnings into the schools to impact on teachers’ work.

From the outset of the private sector program the Principal, the Heads of the two campuses and the grade level Supervisors were strongly supportive of the goals of the project and the rhetoric reinforced their commitment. As the program progressed their engagement and willingness to go beyond their typical teaching duties became more obvious as Supervisors and teachers put in extra hours to hold meetings and complete observations as a part of their continued commitment. The continued progress and ongoing teacher interest in the professional development planned was motivating for not only those in the program but their colleagues observing what was happening from the outside.
Individual and Collective learning

Throughout each project, trainers developed them with the stakeholders’ needs in mind. The program leaders’ rhetoric espoused values and principles of collaboration and sharing, and the reality, as we attempted to implement these through the program, were largely aligned. Although initially it appeared that some participants wanted templates or ‘recipes’ for how to do things rather than working through tasks together, as the programs developed they began to see the value in the CoP model and the benefits gained from opening classroom doors and sharing lessons and ideas together. They indicated that whereas previously that had only really valued professional development as workshops where the experts provided the input and their role was one of information receiver, they could now see how useful such professional learning was in facilitating individual and collective learning and effective school improvement.

In the private sector project some participants stated that previously they had unspoken ways of doing things such as “dummying down” work and tests so students had some success and parents were kept happy. The professional development program provided opportunities for teachers to raise these issues collectively in meetings and work toward improving the teaching, learning and assessment as they engaged in Action Research together.

Logistics

Some logistical challenges were also evident. These mainly related to travel and time. In both the government program and graduate program many of the participants had to travel from some distance to the Ministry training centre or university and their workload requirements sometimes conflicted with the sessions so that attendance was varied. This led to differences in people’s understanding of the program requirements and expectations.

The government participants, the private school teachers and many of the graduate students were busy professionals carrying extensive workloads and responsibilities so it was crucial for the professional learning to be manageable and professionally valuable within this framework. In the government and graduate program the faculty team constantly reminded participants to narrow their focus on realistic topics that were grounded in real problems and issues in their professional workplace. The Supervisors were asked to undertake team projects so that the research workload was shared and thus less onerous. They were asked to set very specific timelines with clearly understood deadlines. In the third and fourth phases of the government program participants were provided with ongoing supervision and support between the main workshop days. These parameters enabled the teams to stay focused and the projects to remain manageable and achievable. A similar support system of supervision and guidance was provided by faculty teams for the private sector school and graduate programs.

Communication

Communication issues provided a variety of challenges across the Action Research programs. An obvious one was the fact that the English-speaking faculty team were working in a different cultural and linguistic context. The translation of content was a demanding and challenging task. In Phase One of the government project for example, it was difficult to find a suitable translator for classes and the presentation in English followed by translation to Arabic was time-consuming. Here also the young university graduate translator who was a novice teacher with limited experience in Action Research continually struggled in her role. She also felt a tension between her university role as a translator and that of her cultural position as a young female working with senior professional colleagues, many of whom were male.

Communication about content was less of a challenge in the private school context where English was the medium of instruction, but the issue here was providing opportunities for teachers to air
frustrations about difficulties in moving towards school improvement without losing motivation for the new project. The process of airing concerns is an integral part in the change process (Fullan, 1993). If this is not permitted, it has a negative impact on morale. This is supported in the literature (Frank, 1985) who notes that individuals cease to share their ideas with management and turn to alternate means to express themselves such as the ‘grapevine’ (Kreps, 1990). The importance of voicing concerns was clearly understood by the supervisors and the principal. They were aware that some teachers were fearful of change and yet were to ready to allow such discussion considering it “a normal part of the change process.”

In the graduate program the language of instruction was English but the challenge here was communication of new ideas at a senior academic level. The reading material used complex and sophisticated language and the faculty teachers had to think carefully about appropriate strategies to assist the graduates’ understanding.

Conclusion

Through participation in collaborative Action Research the participants in the three different programs were transformed. This paper has identified and discussed the key factors that impacted on their professional growth and also on the learning of the faculty developers themselves. The process of professional learning is shown as complex, collaborative and co-constructed. Proof of the value of the Action Research model was evident in the outcome of this process where Supervisors, teachers and graduate students developed greater knowledge, skills and confidence in their content area instructional approaches, in their attitudes toward their students, in their content areas, and in themselves as teachers of children or as leaders in educational change. They had become ‘change agents’ for better leadership, teaching, learning and added value for the young Emiratis who will soon take on leadership roles in this nation.

REFERENCES


Development.


Kember, D. (2002). Long-term outcomes of educational action research projects. *Educational action research* 10 (1) 83-103


For further information contact:

Dr Barb Harold: [barbara.harold@zu.ac.ae](mailto:barbara.harold@zu.ac.ae)

Dr Lauren Stephenson: [lauren.stephenson@zu.ac.ae](mailto:lauren.stephenson@zu.ac.ae)