CONTENTS

Problem-Solving Principles For Problem-Solving Principals 1
Education Policy And Research: Some Reflections 8
Appraisal: A Process of Betrayal? 12
Professional Development - A Career-Long Quest 21
Action Research By Distance Learning - Approaches To A Challenging Task 26
Power Sharing - The Case Of Selwyn College 34
Effective Management Of Educational Organisations: Theory And Practice 43
Why Study School Culture? 58
Issues Of Quality Curriculum Delivery - A Perspective From The Centre 65
A Special Kind Of Quality - The Management Of Learners With Special Needs In Schools 72

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT - A CAREER-LONG QUEST

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Professional development is a life line for quality work environments and satisfying careers. In teacher education, it is desirable to have staff who are continual learners, willing to experiment with new ideas and practices to meet the ever-changing needs of students in training. If college lecturers and practising teachers modelled effective practice in their daily work, powerful messages would be conveyed to the next generations.

Times of increased demands for quality and accountability, it seems that there is less risk taking and experimentation occurring. This seems a sad state of affairs because much learning results from making mistakes and adapting practice. Appraisal systems and performance pay could well have worked against the very principles of effective learning, where teachers support their learners and encourage innovation. Too many teachers are concerned almost entirely with goals that they know will be measured by their appraisers rather than those which ill open up new directions.

Having read Barth's book, *Improving Schools From Within*, several times, I have been left with several puzzling sessions which follow from the metaphors which Barth uses for schools. Schools are likened to sandboxes, here staff operate in parallel play situations. I wonder if the same metaphor could apply to Colleges of education? Barth (1991, p. 16) writes about the benefits of this parallel play, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek way, as being:

...isolation from others who might take our time, challenge our practice, steal our ideas or have us do things differently. The price of such parallel play is that we ward off those who might help us to do things better and with whom together we might do grander things than either could do alone.

Collegiality

The first question, I have then, is related to the notion of collegiality. Collegiality does not appear in the effective schools literature as a pre-requisite for a healthy institution. It is hidden by other goals more closely associated with the purposes of schools; in particular, the involvement of staff in decision making. Barth reminds us that collegiality is a nice, perhaps risky, soft and fuzzy notion which is desirable, yet difficult to put into practice.

Collegiality is not a natural state in schools and never will be in Barth's opinion. This is not to say that collegiality is in the too-hard basket. For Barth, (1991, p. 32)

The risks and costs of interdependence are nothing next to the risks and costs of sustaining a climate of emotional toxicity, of working in isolation, in opposite corners of the sandbox. Barth does not believe that teachers or principals really teach or learn well in a climate of competition, isolation or seige.

The good outcome of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms and the curriculum initiatives has been the need for staff to work together and acknowledge their beliefs about the way children learn. With so much change, teachers like themselves more vulnerable if they remain in 'adjoining caves'. In other words, survival is all about adults kings with one another, observing one another, helping one another. This goes beyond congenial relationships acknowledging the fact that we need to talk about our beliefs and practices with other professionals in order to confirm our actions. Often these beliefs are not visible to individuals themselves but become so with discussion.

Barth (1991, p. 31) cites Little who gives a useful definition of collegiality as being the presence of four specific haviours. These are that:

Adults in schools talk about practice. These conversations about teaching and learning are frequent, continuous and precise.
(ii) Adults in schools observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching and administration. These observations become the practice to reflect on and talk about.

(iii) Adults engage together in work on curriculum by planning, designing, researching, and evaluating curriculum.

(iv) Adults in schools teach each other what they know about teaching, learning and leading. Craft knowledge is revealed, articulated and shared.

These behaviours are precisely what the course members in our educational management courses typically write in the course evaluations about the type of learning they enjoy with other adults. In the Effective Principalship and Middle Management courses, all course members present a group seminar three times during the course. These are frequently mentioned in the evaluations as being the best feature of the course.

One course member wrote: “I enjoyed and found the interactions with other teachers in similar situations informative. I also learnt from the different presentations which were given.” Another course member cited the reason for attending the middle management course as a newly appointed deputy principal, as being: “the opportunity to meet and discuss with colleagues who would share/advise and thereby clarify the role and direction of a deputy principal.”

These comments suggest to me that there are not enough opportunities in schools for teachers to discuss their roles and receive feedback on their work with other colleagues. If teachers received the type of collegial support, as suggested by Little, within their own work environments, then schools would be able to leave the sandbox metaphor behind and concentrate on being ‘honeybees’.

Reflective practice

Since re-reading Barth, I have also been mulling over the notion of reflective practice. This coincided with my struggle to find a suitable title for one of the middle management sessions. My original intention was to incorporate appraisal into a professional development and review theme. Increasingly, I became somewhat uncomfortable with the word ‘appraisal’ and did not wish to use it. After much word searching I chose “strategies for collegial support”. There seemed to be more hope of teamwork and sharing of ideas with this emphasis on development rather than control and summative evaluation. It has been my observation that many schools have launched forth into appraisal systems without first preparing the ground. The result has tended to be a system which has been dominated by management or has had no part in helping the person do a better job. I began to see self-reflection as an alternative which could lead to more worthwhile professional development for an individual.

I was also aware that individuals often required help to fully appreciate their actions as a basis for further improvement. Oberg and Field (1987) cited Jardine who maintained that reflection required “some kind of stimulus, whether in the form of a person, a policy, a personal experience, or another person against whom beliefs and intentions could be tested”. I was getting the same messages from course members who were telling me that the course was valued because it provided a range of opportunities for support.

Thus, reflection was working for these teachers because they had the “necessary dispositions or ways of viewing the social and moral qualities of their actions”. Oberg and Field (1987) provide a useful list of conditions necessary for reflection which is worthwhile mentioning at this time. They argue that,

Teachers must have a commitment to improve practice, a willingness to question practice and to entertain alternatives, a willingness to take responsibility for their actions and intentions, faith in themselves as a source of improvement, and a certain willingness to risk exposure of themselves as teachers.

While these conditions rest with individuals, it is also acknowledged that help from outsiders can be beneficial.

Currently, in New Zealand, there are groups of teachers who are practising this type of reflection in two ways. Some are using quality learning circles as a means to explore issues and themes of common interest with other colleagues. Others are using peer assisted leadership techniques which have originated at the Far West Laboratory.
for Educational Research and Development in the work of Barnett and Lee. In the peer assisted leadership (PAL) programme, Barnett (1989) describes their approach:

School leaders working with colleagues to engage in inquiry, reflection, and analysis about their work. Peer partners observe and interview each other on the job over time, collecting and analysing information about their own and their partner’s leadership activities.

Barnett likens the process to action research and peer coaching. While these techniques have been developed to assist leaders in their jobs, there is nothing to stop teachers at all levels from adopting this approach, providing that there is management support and possible release time available.

Learning the Strategies for Collegial Support

Shadowing and reflective interviewing (questioning) are the building blocks for peer assisted leadership. These activities require careful training. Robertson and Strachan (1994) have developed a useful booklet and tape for such training. Barnett emphasises the fact that:

Reflective questioning differs from other forms of questioning or coaching. Its intention is not to direct the respondent to a conclusion pre-determined by the questioner. For questioning to be truly reflective, it must allow the respondents to explore their own thinking. The questioner must respect the respondent, suspend judgement, and not attempt to manipulate or ‘fix’ the person’s thinking.

Barnett cautions that the success of reflective interviewing depends on variables such as:

* the context in which it will be used;
* the purpose for its use; and
* the relationship between the questioner and the person being questioned.

Several guidelines are given by Barnett to support questioners in preparing questions. These are to:

(i) Base questions on the respondent’s own experiences,
(ii) Word questions in neutral, non-judgemental ways,
(iii) Keep an overall purpose in mind,
(iv) Be prepared to follow up initial questions,
(v) Use a neutral tone of voice,
(vi) Incorporate active listening skills and
(vii) Refrain from giving advice.

Robertson and Strachan add one other guideline which is not to interrupt the respondents while they are talking.

Canning (1991, p. 19) writes of the struggle teachers have in finding their own voices; *i.e.* being able to reflect on their actions. In time, teachers reported that they learned to ask questions for themselves with reflection taking the form of an internal dialogue. Canning (1991, p. 20) cites a student, Melichar, as saying:

It is the questioning that I find most significant to reflection. The questions force a deeper look and keep me from being superficial. If the questions are the right ones, I begin to grow. I feel a little tug, almost a painful little exposure, when the questions are what I need them to be.

For another one of Canning’s students, (1991, p. 20) Preston, the questions never changed.

The key questions were:

(i) What’s going on here?
(ii) Is that significant?
(iii) What makes you say that?
(iv) What do you want?
(v) Does that scare you?
(vi) Have you ever thought about such and such, some model from the literature, for example? Why?
What does that mean?
Where does that come from?
Do you want to talk about that? Anything else?
Have you learned anything?

The same student summed up the reflective process by saying:

When reflection doesn’t work for me, it’s because I’m avoiding certain questions. I know what those certain questions are because they make me feel vulnerable. I have to take a risk. It’s an issue of identity. In this kind of reflection, I’m getting right to the core in understanding why I act the way I do. I think that’s important if reflection is to do anything for you. Only a teacher can change a teacher. You can only change yourself.

Conclusion

Thus, the success of professional development rests with the individual. When they are open to the noti reflective practice and have ownership of the process, learning is most likely to occur. The challenge for professional development is given by Barth (1991, p. 46) who writes: “Learning is not something like chicken pox, a childhood disease that makes you itch for a while and then leaves you immune for the rest of your life.”

References


