ACTION RESEARCH VERSUS CLINICAL SUPERVISION – WHICH IS YOUR CHOICE?

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ABSTRACT

On 28 February, 2006, the Director of EPRD Dr. Salleh Hassan was invited by the State Education Department of Malacca to launch the Seminar on Action Researches carried out by some of the educators in the three prongs of education, namely the primary and secondary schools and the teachers' training college in the state. The researches carried out and the findings obtained by the teachers involved were compiled in a book, which is the first to be published by a state education department in Malaysia. The education officers in Malacca state strongly believe that 'action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices' (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p.5). Subsequently after the launching of this seminar, teachers in Malacca have been called to carry out more action researches. This is a remarkable step taken by a state education department in Malaysia to foster educational change and reform. Nevertheless, this paper aims at comparing and contrasting the two methods which can be employed to improve education in schools, namely Action Research and Clinical Supervision. Some proposals have been highlighted; positive aspects of both the methods have been discussed. It remains a question for school leaders to decide which method is more important or is more needed to help to improve the competency of teachers and to improve the qualities of teaching in their organizations so that students have the opportunities to obtain optimal benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Goodman (1998, p.50) claims that 'during the last two decades, the field of educational and social research has undergone a great deal of intellectual and methodological turmoil. Many educational theories have been proposed and introduced. School administrators and teachers are encouraged to try to practice these theories. In order to adopt any of these theories into a normal practice in education, school administrators and teachers have to engage themselves in 'change' and subsequently they need to transform the role as 'teachers' to 'learners' or playing the two roles simultaneously. Change is obliquitous and there is always something fresh to discover about change. School administrators and teachers need to be aware that 'change is a journey, not a Blueprint' (Fullan 1994, p.24) and they have to marry theories with practice so as to put them into praxis. This inevitably becomes precarious and threatening to those who are newly exposed to action research. Even though David Boud and David Walker (1991, p.37) claim that learners are actively pursuing knowledge and will find opportunities for learning in a variety of situations, but the questions remain: How many school administrators and teachers are active learners? How many of them are ready or willing to be active learners?

RATIONALE FOR SPECIFIC CHANGE

Education needs 'change' to enlighten it and to move it away from the old deep-rooted and long-engrained misconception that teaching is a 'lonely profession'. Most of our teachers do not anticipate that 'effective collaborations operate in the world of ideas, examining existing practices critically, seeking better alternatives and working hard together at bringing about improvements and assessing their worth' (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991, p.55). The call for collaborative enquiry and enquiry by educators rarely surface (McTaggart 1991, p.2) as the didactic approach and 'chalk and talk' method of teaching have held back most of the teachers from the changing trend. They may find it difficult to 'unlearn' (to forget the traditional teaching method they were told to adopt), to 'learn' (to gain some new knowledge or methodologies in teaching) and 'relearn' (obtain correct information on old things that may have been told in wrong ways). We regard this dilemma as being akin to that of an identity crisis amongst Malaysian teachers.

We cannot but to agree with MacNaughton (1998, p.31) that within critical theory, people are perceived as capable of changing their lives to improve them. However, MacNaughton feels that research must be undertaken by expert researchers who can be objective and value-free in their search for truth about education (p.30). It remains a question as who is to make judgment on the research findings by the experts. Anyhow, we should not be deterred by MacNaughton's feelings about research to be taken by experts as his opinion may be is just a mere fallacy! As educators, we ought 'to do something which will bring about improvement or change' (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p.48).

There is a general consensus that schools should be given a new identity as a dynamic organization. Teachers' and students' roles, teaching and learning processes, learning environment and method of managing the school curriculum need to be reviewed (Noor Azmi 1996). This is in line with the goals of action research.

Knaus (1997, p.10) asserts precisely that 'in order to open your mind to positive change, you need to develop what I call a rational perspective'. Building a rational perspective involves putting failure into perspective confronting beliefs that are holding us back. It is not quite possible to have 'change' without reflection and evaluation. A possible way to perform 'change' is by taking up action research.

ACTION RESEARCH

Action research involves researchers and his group members sharing concern with everyday practical problems encountered by teachers and perhaps students. Broadly, action research can be divided into three types, namely Participatory Action Research (an alternative form of social research), Critical Action Research (one that involves mixed groups of participants from various sectors) and Classroom Action Research (Henry & McTaggart 1996, p.6). Action research is a cyclic project involving planning, action and observation, reflection and evaluation. It aims at a big concern – to attain meaningful professional development for the researches involved in particular and improvement in educational situations in general, through systematic and strategic research methodologies. Most often than not, action research involves a triangular process of three parties – teacher, observer and students. In action research, each act (planning, action and observation, reflection and evaluation)

is called a spiral. The researcher will move to the next spiral after the plan has been revised so to achieve more attainable or intended results.

Action research project aims to reduce teacher-student barrier by inviting students to be evaluators. A democratic relationship between teacher and students will be established if the teacher is receptive to criticism and students are not scared of giving constructive criticism. It is hope that by going through this process explicit change in action research group may bring forth implicit change in organization (school). Nevertheless, this practice is too sensational and it may appear to be alienated to most of the teachers. It involves great courage to make a 'change' as in our normal practice, teachers are not used to be assessed by their students. It is indisputable that 'change' is uncertain and risk-taking, and at times, it can be precarious. Change under compulsion is defensive, superficial and short-lived (Fullan 1994, p.3). As such, we can see that action research which involves 'change' is more of a political process (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p.22). It is understandable that most of the time action researchers are left working on their own. This is particularly true in Malaysian schools where any teacher who is willing to take up action research may have great problem in getting colleagues to be involved in his or her action research project. Teachers need a platform to have a better understanding of the processes leading to the results of schooling (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p.32). By adapting a critical approach in examining their practices, teachers will find that they are given opportunities to realize that there are 'gaps between the actual and the possible in education' (p.30). Small moments of success in teachers' action research projects will definitely provide evidences that prudent risks engaged in action research involving change are worth taking (Knauss 1996, p.5). However, we cannot but to agree that even though action research has exerted its power in improving education, there are constraints and limitations, which may scare teachers off. Further more, Hodgkinson (1957, n.p.) asserts that group process is not easy to carry out. As such, improving or reforming education remains a struggle over what education is all about. (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988, p.35).

Action research confirms that 'social research has the same purpose as natural sciences, namely, to discover knowledge that could be proven and identified as "truth"' (Goodman 1998, p.53). It is through action research that a change in the organization (school) may evolve eventually when more teachers take part in the programme.

Action research disputes the postulation that 'there is simply not enough opportunity and not enough encouragement for teachers to work together, learn from each other and improve their expertise as a community' (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991, p.1). In fact, action research aims at purposeful change. 'Purposeful change is the new norm in teaching ... it is time we realize that teachers above all are moral change agents in society – a role that must be pursued explicitly and aggressively' (Fullan 1994, p.14).

It is hope that through action research:

i. teachers could observe new ideas and techniques in action in a team-teaching situation;
ii. the class teacher and drama teacher could discuss and develop new ideas together, linking these in with ongoing class work;
iii. both teachers could observe the students more closely and confer about their progress and needs;
iv. attitudes, skills and confidence on the part of the students can be improved.

(Hogan 1996, p.13)

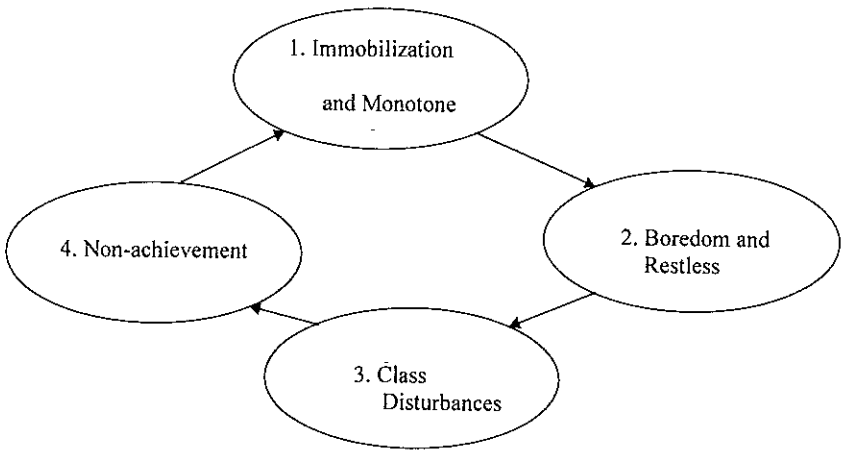
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Michael Fullan asserts that 'teaching is a lonely profession'. He feels that the professional isolation of teachers limits teachers' access to new ideas and better solutions (Fullan 1994, p.34). This kind of isolation inevitably drives professional stress to fester and accumulate. It also seems to permit 'the problem of teacher incompetence (Bridges 1992, p.3) to persist to the detriment of students and perhaps the teachers themselves. Lortie (1975, cited in Fullan 1994, p.34) agrees that isolation may produce conservation and resistance to innovation in teaching.

The professional isolation syndrome permits some teachers to 'exonerate themselves and avoid facing the real reasons for their lack of progress' (Knaus 1997, p.185). Schon (1983, cited in Smyth 1987, p.13) claims that there is a crisis of confidence in the professional knowledge amongst teachers. It is indisputable that most of our teachers have the sort of 'firm and confident' belief that 'what is wrong by using chalk and talk method? After all year in and year out I have produced excellent students and good results wanted by the school administrators!' This is strongly opposed by Lochhead. He (1991, pp.77-78, cited in Fitzsimons 1994, p.28)

attacks 'the practice of teaching students facts before asking them to think' and he also claims that 'knowledge which is composed of such facts tend to be fragile, disorganized and difficult to apply'. As such, students easily feel bored and tend to lose interest in study.

Stenhouse (1984, p.69) advocates that good teaching is created by good teachers. We have a firm believe that a teacher who shows interest in the subject taught by him or her may some how foster students' interest to learn (Shubanah 1997, p.84). Showing interest in teaching can be done in many ways. Trying to understand the students so as to have a better rapport with them is one of the methods. The use of skills of stimulus variation is another as we strongly believe that

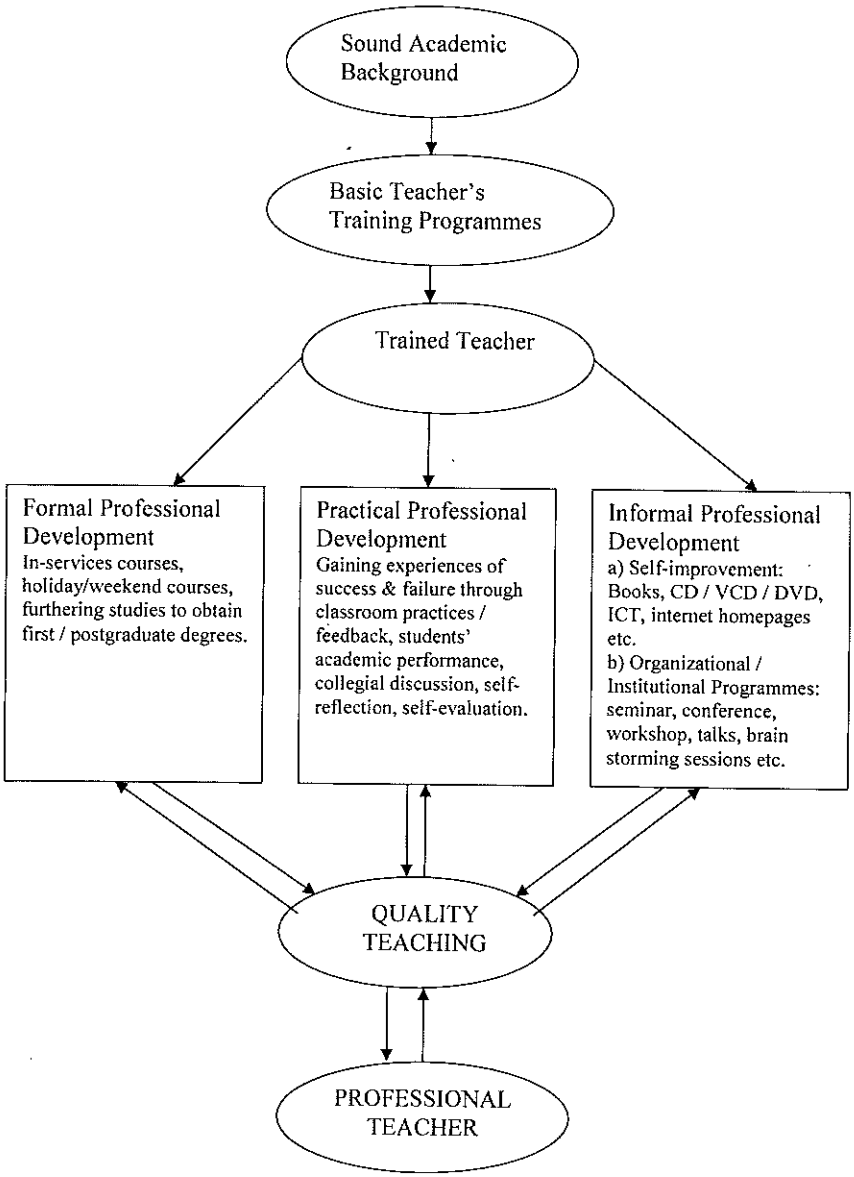


Failure in teaching and learning processes – the present author.

Thanks to our Ministry Of Education for taking up great effort and pain to organize numerous workshops, seminars and courses for teachers and educators not in school levels so as to improve education in Malaysia. Even though the Ministry of Education and the State Education Departments may once in a blue moon ask for feedbacks from schools, the only worry is they may have 'theatre' feedbacks, which are not easy to be testified! Moreover, 'follow-up evaluation occurs infrequently' (Fullan 1993, p.316).

Nias (1987, p.12) says that 'teaching consists of making frequent personal judgements which are themselves dependent upon the receipt and interpretation of information.' Robert F, Mager (1995, p.105) in a way supports professional development as he says that 'the old adage about practice making perfect about as much as little truth in it as the one about experience being the best teacher. Practice will improve a skill, and experience will help one's competence – but only if there is a feedback regarding the quality of the performance.' In addition, David Boud and David Walker (1991, p.9) further assert that 'no matter how much formal education and training people receive, they will not really be equipped for a position of responsibility unless they have the ability to learn from their experience.' Their assertion further demands the need of professional development to be cultivated amongst teachers.

Even though David Boud and David Walker do have encouraging advocates by saying that 'learners are actively pursuing knowledge and will find opportunities for learning in a variety of situations' (p.37), professional development will rarely germinate and grow if the five A's (Awareness, Action, Acceptance, Assimilation, Actualization) in the five stages of change suggested by Dr. William J. Knaus (1997) are not being practiced to foster self-improvement or professional development. A typical self-improvement or professional development is suggested by the model given as follows:



The Processes of Professional Development according to the present author.

From the Model of Professional Development suggested above, both Formal Professional Development and Informal Professional Development may some how enhance professional isolation syndrome even though exchange of ideas infrequently occurs. On the contrary, Practical Professional Development will help teachers to anticipate that 'effective collaborations operate in the world of ideas, examining existing practices critically, seeking better alternatives and working hard together at bringing about improvements and assessing their worth' (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991, p.55). Consequently, there is a crucial need for the educational authorities to set up or encourage teachers to set up 'reference groups' (Nias 1987, p.39) so that teachers will become less isolated and more reflective (Schubert & Lopez-Schubert 1997, p.216). Generative and constructive ideas will then begin to percolate, and any change programme designed for professional development should not include outdated methods of motivation such as coercion and threats (Spencer & Pruss 1993, pp.108-109). Programme planners need to realize 'to what extent do activities and courses which are planned to assist them in their teaching actually help them?' and 'how do teachers help other teachers?' (Holly 1987, p.45)

Setting up reference groups involves institutional or personal change. In 2004, there were some negative feedbacks about the process of teaching and learning Science and Mathematics in English in spite of courses being conducted for the teachers. A school-based programme, namely the Buddy Support System, was introduced. The noble intention of this programme was to engage English teachers to help Mathematics and Science teachers who needed their help. Reports were sent to various State Education Departments. No analysis was returned to schools. It still remains in the mist as how effective and practical is this system since it is always difficult to testify the validity and accuracy of the reports and it seems to be a problem to scan 'theatre' reports.

Some school administrators find that English teachers do not play better role in the Buddy Support System compared to old-timer Mathematics and Science teachers who are proficient in English as the English used in Mathematics and Science subjects are too technical to English teachers. They take the initiative to pair up a Mathematics or Science teacher who is good in English with another Mathematics or Science teacher who is not proficient in English. It works out better now. Congratulations to these school administrators who could quickly remedy

the shortcomings! We see that whatever methods or systems we want to implement, teachers need to be motivated and self-motivation is the sine qua non of professional development. This is imbedded in the requirements of Clinical Supervision. Consequently, we find that clinical supervision, as compared to action research, is a better and more intended educational methodology to help Mathematics and Science teachers who are not proficient in English.

CLINICAL SUPERVISION

The Principles and Practice of Clinical Supervision were initiated and implemented by a group of teacher educators at Harvard University in the 1950s basing on the realization of linking experienced and inexperienced teachers in helping and improving one another (Smyth 1996, p.3). Morris Cogan, Robert Goldhammer and Bob Anderson were the pioneers of this project.

Clinical supervision is a method intended to construe, challenge and change the old traditional ways of teaching in a lonely manner. W. John Smyth (1996, p.3) claims that clinical supervision emphasizes the importance of teachers working collaboratively with colleagues to "uncover, and to attend to, the hidden messages implicit in classroom "teaching. It not only acts as a 'second pair of eyes' in the classroom but it also enables us to examine more closely the social purposes of schooling rather than just to tinker with the technical skills of teaching. Clinical supervision aims to help a teacher expand his or her perception of what it means to be a professional teacher through the discovering of strengths and weaknesses and to assist a teacher to examine personal teaching regularly and systematically (Smyth 1996, p.6).

Sergiovanni (1976, p.24) claims that clinical supervision is a planned intervention that brings about improvements in classroom operation and teacher behaviour (cited in Smyth 1996, p.5) but clinical supervision is not a common practice in most places as 'building collaborative cultures involves a long developmental journey. There are no short cuts ... because collaborative cultures do not evolve quickly; they can be unattractive to administrators looking for swift implementation expedients.' (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991, p.57) It is hope that through clinical supervision, a change in the organization (schools in particular) may evolve eventually when more teachers take part in the programme. Teachers will then have more opportunities to determine their strengths and weaknesses through regular

and systematic observation and analysis of their teaching by employing open and sincere discussions.

Clinical supervision is cyclical, where each cycle consists of four stages, namely Pre-Observation Conference, Observation, Analysis and Post-Observation Conference. It aims at purposeful change with the intention to improve in the teaching by using the feedbacks obtained in the last stage to modify teaching techniques to achieve intended outcome. Subsequently, 'clinical supervision is labour intensive' and 'it is a time-consuming process' (Smyth 1996, p.9). Harris (1976) says that 'time is always a scarce commodity' (cited in Smyth 1996, p.9) and Little (1982) notes that 'in a work situation where time is a valued, coveted, even disputed form of currency, teacher can effectively discount any interaction by declaring it as a "waste of time"' (cited in Smyth 1996, p.10). As a result, most of the teachers are finding excuses of not to be involved in the clinical supervision programmes. It would be interesting to find out how many of the English teachers who are paid for the special incentive allowances truly and actively involved in classroom-based clinical supervision to help their buddies in the Buddy Support System introduced by the Ministry Of Education.

Ellard emphasizes that clinical supervision involves a commitment to action – its starting point is the activity of the teacher during daily teaching' (cited in Smyth 1996, p.10). Therefore, there is practically no reason for teachers to procrastinate or delay in taking part in this programme especially the Mathematics, Science and English teachers. Michael Le Boeuf (1996, p.216) says that 'procrastination is a great cop-out for a poor effort' and he (p.216) further says that "I just couldn't get around to it until the last minute" is the common story of the procrastinator.'

We have no intention to inquire how successful is the Buddy Support System, but we have the intention to throw the idea of investigating the more meaningful and attainable perspective of sighting clinical supervision from the observer's views. We would recommend Mathematics and Science teachers who are not so proficient in English to act as observers in the clinical supervision projects with a pure intention to improve themselves. They need to take note carefully the articulation skills, phonetics, the use of apt words or expressions, the correct use of prepositions, articles, grammar etc. It is suggested that the observers can

just engage themselves in one or two items to take note initially. Further more, it is highly recommended that they should begin as the observers in clinical supervision by observing Mathematics or Science teachers and not the English teachers. Observing English teachers' teaching techniques should be less frequent initially so that Mathematics and Science teachers are not 'frightened' by English teachers who can use beautiful English and bombastic words in conducting their lessons. After all, what these less competent teachers need is to speak correct English, to use correct grammar and technical terms which are more easily attained from the Mathematics and Science teachers who are proficient in English. It is our sincere hope that by engaging themselves in clinical supervision, those incompetent teachers teaching Mathematics and Science in English will become more confident and 'daring' in speaking English.

CONCLUSION

'Change in education will come about only when teachers are given opportunity ...' (Nias 1987, p.53). Change is precarious and it involves risks. Most of the people involved in researches are professionally isolated. Subsequently, action researchers and teachers who are willing to be engaged in clinical supervision need to be motivated. Self-motivation is the sine qua non of professional development.

'Professional isolation' will remain as a stigma in education unless and until teachers seriously practice life-long education which is treated as a set of organizational and procedural guidelines that will foster life-long learning (Knapper & Cropley 1991, p.20). 'Learning about teaching is a life-long process', says Smyth (1984, p.14). To Tough (1971, cited in Knapper & Cropley 1991, p.20), this type of learning must be deliberate and intentional with definite goal. The duel against 'professional isolation' by all educational sectors is time consuming as 'building collaborative culture involves a long developmental journey' (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991, p.57). The duel should not be solely faced and the struggle against professional isolation cannot be merely shouldered by the Ministry Of Education or the State Education Department officers, it is indeed the duty of all school administrators to create a community of active, creative and conscious beings, who are capable of initiating change and improving education through critical reflections. We need to replace negativism and rhetoric with informed action, and individual and institutional renewal should become our raison d'etre (Fullan 1993, p. 354).

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