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Curriculum Depth Study in Colleges; Current Practices and Imperatives for Change.

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Abstract

The article outlines the origin of the Curriculum Depth Study in Zimbabwe's Teacher Education Curriculum. After the broad focus it focuses on Curriculum Depth Study activities at Mkoba Teachers' College. The activities are described as a basis for pointing out some of the limitations of current Curriculum Depth Study practices. The article argues that current Curriculum Depth Study practices need to be replaced by paction research oriented activities informed by principles gleaned from teacher professionalism. The article concludes by presenting a proposal for infusing action research into the teacher education curriculum.

Introduction

This discussion begins with a short description of the origins of Curriculum Depth Study (C.D.S). This is followed by an examination of the nature of C.D.S at Mkoba Teachers' College (M.T.C), a primary teachers' college, in an attempt to identify weaknesses. A way forward in the form of a proposal to introduce action research to replace C.D.S is then suggested. Though this discussion is based on current practices at M.T.C it is hoped the proposal is applicable on other colleges.

Origins of Curriculum Depth Study

The origins of Curriculum Depth Study (C.D.S) can be traced back to 1978.

The Primary Teacher Education Syllabus and Regulations (1978), expressing the characteristics of the teacher envisaged says in part, that the newly qualified teacher will undertake a systematic evaluation of new textbooks and materials and be confident and purposeful, inventive and resourceful. Similar sentiments were expressed by the Teacher Education Review Committee (TERC) of 1986. Among other goals of teacher education, the TERC report highlights the cultivation in student teachers, the ability to utilize critical, independent and experimental approaches to problems of learning and teaching as well as the development of evaluation skills, resourcefulness and innovativeness.

M.T.C (1990) notes that Teacher Education lacked relevance, appropriateness and the reflectivity required of it. For support, M.T.C (1990) refers to Rements' (1975) observations from an evaluation of Teacher Education programmes. Rements points out that by and large teacher education programmes continued to be dominated by an apprenticeship perspective. However, such a perspective over emphasizes technical concerns which minimize the extent to which teachers can take an active role in the comprehension and transformation of school and classroom realities. It was on the basis of the requirements of the teacher education regulations, the TERC report and observations made on weaknesses in teacher education that C.D.S was introduced.

Rationale

The Primary Teacher Education Syllabus and Regulations (1987 : 27) states that "C.D.S is an extension of Applied Education, and is meant to give students the opportunity to study in depth one Applied Education subject (curriculum) to a greater depth than is possible in the prescribed Applied Education Syllabus." In response to the syllabus and regulations, M.T.C (1989) says C.D.S was introduced to give students an opportunity to investigate curricular issues, evaluate teaching approaches and materials/ resources independently to a depth commensurate with their interests and abilities.

The M.T.C, C.D.S Rationale and Forms of C.D.S (1990 :2) highlights the nature of C.D.S as a “ --- research orientation to curriculum issues involving the application of subject knowledge and education theory in developing a specific small unit to be taught in one subject area in the primary school curriculum. M.T.C (1990) summarizes the importance of C.D.S by stating that “C.D.S should reveal evidence of some independence of thought, reflection on problems, self criticism and indicate some depth of analysis of professional problems.” But the major question is; does C.D.S. implementation meet these noble professional goals?

Implementation At Mkoba Teachers' College

In common with all primary teachers' colleges, student teachers at Mkoba Teachers' College are recruited on the strength of a minimum of the five ordinary level passes. The course duration is three years broken down into three stages : the first year in college, the second year on teaching practice in schools and the third year back in college.

C.D.S. is a component of Section 4 (Professional Studies) of the teacher education course. For C.D.S. the student is required to choose one subject from the ten subjects in Section 4 (Syllabus B). The choice of this subject is done at the end of the first year. A few mass lectures on the mechanics of C.D.S are given before students disperse to their chosen subject areas. In the subject areas, the students are divided into tutorial groups in which they are helped design their individual problems and how they propose to tackle their researches as individuals. In the second year, they carry out their fieldwork. In their third year, they are assisted in compiling the research into a written report.

Limitations

C.D.S is introduced in the first year before students have had hands on experience in the field.

Therefore, in the definition of the problem, the students are restricted to subject knowledge, some aspects of methodology may be considered based on a few micro-teaching sessions undertaken in some of the subject areas. Moreover, knowledge of the subject should not be an area of concern taking into consideration the academic qualifications of the students and the level they are being trained to teach.

Therefore, focussing on subject knowledge is baseless. The timing of the introduction of C.D.S is also unreasonable. Research problems should not be imagined or invented. Teaching is a practical occupation in which the teacher deals with real children and real complexities of the school and the classroom. Genuine problems can only be realised during the actual teaching. Focussing on subject knowledge and aspects of methodology is a too restricted view of the teacher's professional life. It seems that, what is learned in another component of the course (Theory of Education) is not seen as part of the curriculum because C.D.S is only carried out in subject areas. The implication is that the theories of education should not be questioned.

Results

C.D.S tutorial sessions with first years have been a nightmare to both tutor and tutee. Because of their on-the-job inexperience, students naturally do not see any problems in teaching. The tutor who, at most is an armchair teacher is out of touch with most current complexities of teaching. The result of tutorials are impractical research topics which students hardly understand. Evidence of this is the desire by the students to change their topics in the second year. The second year has also been found to be most unproductively used by students in relation to C.D.S. Some form of fieldwork in the form of teaching is usually done, but the fieldwork has sometimes been found to be unrelated to their topics. For some time, the college has had to call all second years back to college at the end of term one for a day of C.D.S supervision. This arrangement arose as a result of problems met in third year when students were supposed to compile their project reports.

During the single day of consultation in the second year, research topics have been changed at the insistence of the student who appears to be more informed by the experience of teaching in term one.

In addition, responses to a survey carried out by the M.T.C. Department of Theory and Practice of Education (1999) the issues and problems raised by students on teaching practice tell a different story. There is no issue raised concerning subject knowledge but such issues as dealing with large classes and lessons and objectives are raised. These should be in their researches.

The implementation of C.D.S at M.T.C seems flawed. One main flaw is that it has been restricted to taught subjects at the expense of a broader view of teaching. That the research should be done independently has reduced teaching to a solitary occupation and yet by its nature and context, teaching is a co-operative occupation. Focussing the research on application of subject knowledge and education theory gives the impression that the construction of knowledge and the development of theories is the preserve of people outside the occupation of teaching. Therefore, it is worthwhile considering whether we still need C.D.S, in its current form. It appears in its current form, it is an exclusive agency for the development of a few aspects of teacher professionalism whose scope is much broader.

Teacher Professionalism

The current approach to teacher education, specifically at M.T.C, generally rests on the assumption that there are specific ways of teaching and certain theories that have to be adapted or adopted by the teacher. Therefore, any research such as C.D.S is focussed towards specific outcomes. Such a model of teacher education contradicts current thinking within the profession. Carr and Kemmis (1986), Hirst (1979) in Mukorera (1997, Lindop (1992) and Walker (1991) in Ngwenya (1998) in general concur in that for anyone to be a professional, their practice and competences should be based on a body of knowledge which is continually refined by the same practitioner.

Therefore, if teachers are to be professionals, the cultivation of a habit in research focussed on their practice should be a main feature of the pre-service course.

Teacher professionalism and therefore the curriculum of teacher education is placed by Proctor (1984) into two broad categories of professional knowledge and professional skills. The same categories are reflected by Vonk (1994) in Mukorera (1997) in the description of the dimensions of professional studies. Proctor (1984) says professional knowledge encompasses knowledge of children, their development, school and society and their relationship and the implementation of the curriculum. Professional knowledge is further divided into two minor categories : propositional knowledge and practical knowledge.

Propositional knowledge which Proctor (1984) calls 'know that' knowledge is akin to the current Theory of Education whose main elements are knowledge of children and their development, teaching and learning, the school and society and the curriculum. The practical knowledge or 'know how' knowledge refers to the more technical aspects of teaching and learning such as communication, preparation, presentation and the learning environment. Proctor (1984) says professional skills are complex cognitive activities involving classroom organisation and curriculum skills. Classroom organisation refers to pedagogical skills such as decisions on learning tasks and methodology in relation to the content. Curriculum skills refer to the understanding and development of curriculum theory, the practice of curriculum development and implementing the curriculum.

As Mukorera (1999) says, professional knowledge and skills encompass what the newly qualified teacher will actually do in schools as they exist.

The analysis of teacher professionalism aids in giving teacher education a more coherent view as well as broadening the hub around which the student teacher should seek professional development.

Student teachers should be assisted to become life long students of their profession because teaching is a complex phenomenon whose understanding cannot be guaranteed by what Freeman (1994:5) in Nyawaranda (1999: 4) calls "Front Loading approach to teacher education" (from theory to practice).

With reference to studies carried out by Noll (1993), Cole and Knowles (1993) and Rust (1994), Nyawaranda (1999) observes that student teachers enter colleges with their own beliefs of the nature of teaching and learning such that the current teacher education approaches would rarely be capable of dislodging these beliefs before the student leaves college. In other words, the prepacked knowledge the student receives at college does not translate into practice. As Nyawaranda (1999) suggests, there is need for alternative approaches to teacher education such as the adoption of a holistic approach which entails an examination of the total context of teaching and learning with a view to developing a better teacher or student of teaching through the development of personal theories that would guide practice. This would be in direct contrast to a teacher who unquestioningly adopts public theories regardless of their unsuitability and impractability. The teacher's actions should be a response to his own thoughts rather than to someone's thoughts.

The challenge to teacher education is the need for the reconceptualisation of learning to teach as an infinite process and that the knowledge of teaching is constructed by the teacher. This entails the development of skills necessary for the engagement of teachers in learning to teach during and after initial training. This is what C.D.S has failed to do because of its focus on acquisition rather than construction of knowledge. This notion of practitioner theorist or teacher researcher is in line with the concept and process of action research, which should guide the C.D.S. process during initial teacher preparation.

Proposal

The proposal to introduce action research is based on the fact that the current scope of C.D.S does not focus on the living concerns of the teacher.

It does not concern actual practices involving the real, material, concrete and particular practices of particular people in particular places. The current form of C.D.S, as Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) say, is not as obstinate as action research is in changing particular practitioners' practices.

Defining Action Research

Somekh (1988:164) in Day (1999:34) describes action research as “--- the study of social situations involving the participants themselves as reseachers, with a view to improving the quality of action within it”. Mckernan (1988:154) in Henson (1996:53) defines action research as a “--- rigorous examination of one's practice as a basis for professional development --- each school --- each classroom is a laboratory in which the curriculum and problems by teachers (not outside researchers) are subject to empirical examination by practitioners.” Ndamba (1999), Carr and Kemmis (1986), Bullough and Gitlin (1995), and Day (1999) allude to the same characteristics as outlined by Somekh (1988) and Mckernan (1988). Oberg and McCurtcheon (1987:117) in Henson (1996:53) appear to sum up action research. They say it is “--- any systematic inquiry, large or small conducted by professionals and focussing on some aspect of their practice in order to find-out more about it, and eventually to act in ways they see as better or more effective.” A more teacher specific definition could be that action research is a small or large scale intervention undertaken by the teachers themselves in order to improve their own practice.

Rationale

In the course of his work, the teacher solves innumerable problems.

Some are solved deliberately and others spontaneously and intuitively through what Polanyi (1983) in Hoyle and John (1995) calls tacit knowledge or our knowing in action. Tacit knowledge is the end product of deliberately repeated direct experiences.

McNiff (1993) says that in the course of his work, the teacher comes across certain situations that occasion crises the result thereof is the teachers' professional instability or disequilibrium which causes the teacher to want to restore the balance. As a way of solving a crisis, the teacher may reflect on the practice and deliberately plan how to solve the problem. This is personal inquiry or what Chomsky (1986) in McNiff (1993:17) calls the "I - enquiry." The I-enquiry tries "--- to show how I was dissatisfied with personal practice, and why, and the steps I have taken to improve it."

The teacher's practice becomes the outcome of his thought and his improved practice an outcome of his improved understanding. The I - enquiry is an enquiry by the self, of the self, not to fit into someone's theory but to enable individual teachers to develop their own theories. McNiff (1993) further says that each individual teacher may legitimately theorise about her own practice and the action of theorising as a process is a concept more appropriate to educational development than a state of referencing a theory. Action research enables teachers to change their practices and their practices to change them. Therefore, action research is concerned with the diagnosis and seeking solutions to educational problems in their contexts thereby adding to the teachers' functional knowledge of his job. In support, Mckernan (1988) in Henson (1996) says action research assists teachers in getting practical solutions and increasing their own understanding of personally experienced educational problems of immediate concern.

Process

Henson (1996) and Day (1999) say action research can be done alone in the privacy of a classroom or teachers may prefer to collaborate. This is supported by Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998:22) who point out that, although it can be viewed as a solitary process, action research is best conceptualised in collaborative terms because it is a social and educational process.

They say it is participatory “--- in the sense that people can only do action research ‘on’ themselves - individually or collectively. It is not done ‘on’ others --- it is done ‘with’ others.”

The process of action research can be divided into three stages which Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) call planning, acting and observing, reflecting on consequences and if need be, replanning. Bullough and Citlin (1995) and Whitehead (1989) have four phrases which can be termed; defining concerns, planning, acting and evaluating and modifying.

In the first phase, the teacher describes in writing the concern or issue and discusses the concern with a colleague. Thereafter, the teacher gathers data concerning the issue by asking a colleague to observe the teacher in action. The collaborator takes down notes focussing on the specific problem. They confer afterwards. Instead of peer observation, the teacher may choose to audio or videotape himself. The teacher may also gather data from the class, for example, through interviewing them. Although at first the problem might appear obvious, other issues might arise which may necessitate the redefinition of the problem or the desire for more specificity. The problem statement is then written down.

In phase two, the teacher writes down the plan for addressing the problem. The plan is discussed with the colleague because it may need revision. It is then implemented. During the implementation, data is gathered through strategies employed in phase one. The data should be written down systematically and must focus on the specific issue.

In phase three, the data is reviewed to determine the effect of the solution. The findings are presented in a written form and shared with the collaborator and even the school at large. Recommendations for further action on the same issue may be necessary or the teacher may focus on a new issue. Refer to the process shown overleaf.

STAGES IN ACTION RESEARCH

ORIGIN OF RESEARCH

- an issue
- a concern
- a crisis

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

- discuss the issue with a colleague.

DEFINITION OF PROBLEM

Gathering data through:

- observation by a colleague
- audio and videotaping
- interviewing learners
- confer with colleague
- define problem.

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

- individual or collaborative planning to effect change.

ACTION

- implementation of plan.
- data collection by colleagues through observation.
- data collection through audio and videotaping.
- data collection through interviewing learners.

RECOMMENDATION

- redefining the issue if it is unsolved.
- OR
- focus on a new issue if the issue has been solved.

PRESENTATION

- writing down findings.
- sharing findings with collaborators.
- sharing findings with the whole staff.

REFLECTION

- review of action
- evaluation of action based on data.

The new inexperienced teacher researcher may want to begin with small solitary classroom based enquiries for experience. Solitary enquiries are also necessary for the student teacher because as Bullough and Gitlin (1995:198) point out collaborative action research places the student in the open "--- before they have engaged in a good deal of self and context study and after a reasonably good level of trust, a feeling of community, has been developed within the cohort group."

The process may also be not as neat as outlined above. The stages may overlap. For example, initial plans may easily become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. Although the process is likely to be fluid, open and responsive, it is advisable for beginning teacher researchers to adhere to the stages as far as possible until such time the process is inbuilt and more or less habitual (Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998). It is important that the well established canons of systematic enquiry should not be deserted.

There is some form of action research in practice in teacher education at M.T.C. For example, during their teaching practice students are required to keep a remedial and extension record book. However, the remediation and extension is focussed on pupils. In other words, the problem or issue of ability, inability or blame rests on the learner. If pupils all performed at the expected level, then there was no need for remedial and extension work. The fact that the teacher plans for remediation and extension is evidence of reflection and action research. It is also evidence that remediation and extension work is an issue more directly linked to the teacher than the learners.

There is also some form of action research as the teacher teaches. For example, as he goes round the class during written work, the teacher may notice some common mistake. He quickly reflects on the problem and stops the class in order to redirect it. Most teachers' actions are based on beliefs or theories drawn from these small episodes of action research.

Mechanics For Implementation

The C.D.S component of the teacher education course could be replaced by a course simply called 'Research'. Research can be introduced at the beginning of the year in the first year in the form of mass lectures where the basics of action research are introduced. The students could be placed into tutorial groups of about ten students per group. They stay in those groups, with the same tutor throughout the three year course mainly for continuity. After mass lectures, tutorial groups meet to review and clarify the contents of the lecture. This could be done once a week. From the second term, the groups and their tutor go for school and classroom observations.

They can also use microteaching and peer teaching sessions for the identification of problems. While one student or class teacher teaches, each student describes in writing what they think are areas of concern which are later discussed as a group or in pairs. They plan what they think is suitable remedial action. The remedial action is put into practice and discussions held. The action research cycle should be followed. These exercises are repeated throughout term two broadening the sources of issues from the lesson, to the classroom and the school. In short, research areas should be sourced from the curriculum of teacher education discussed under teacher professionalism above.

In term three when students go for their home area teaching practice, each student works in collaboration with the class teacher. In those three weeks, the student should attempt some action research. A written report is submitted to the tutor on return to college. These reports are also shared within the group.

In the second year, as far as possible, students could be deployed in relation to their tutorial groups. In the schools, they work on their action researches in pairs or small groups. It would be reasonable to ask each student to submit three written action research reports at the end of the year. In term one, the student mounts a small solitary research. In term two, each student in partnership with another student or the mentor, carries out another classroom research.

In the third term, collectively as a group, the students identify a common problem, plan for remediation together, implement and evaluate. A group report of the research is then produced.

In the third year, when students are back in college, the write-ups may be refined and submitted as a portfolio of research studies. Each student is awarded separate marks for terms 1 and 2 and a group mark for term three. Group marks encourage collaboration and the awareness of teaching as a social activity, a co-operative process.

Problems Envisaged

There is a general uneasiness about the term 'research' - it is threatening. As Boomer (1987) in Bullough and Gitlin (1995) observes, we cannot remove the semantic dye the term has been plunged into. It has accumulated connotations of quantitative data and the attendant problems of statistics. For this fear of research to be overcome, the lecturers should have a clear understanding of action research and its process. In the choice of problematic issues, it should be expected that broad issues such as classroom management may be identified. Such topics need sharpening.

Mechanics for the supervision of the projects need to be worked out. If there is inadequate supervision during the second year, students might be persuaded to submit fictitious or hurriedly done researches because of other pressures of teaching practice.

Conclusion

C.D.S appears to be a one-off event and it is not inclusive of all aspects of the teaching profession. Action research by its nature develops in the teacher a habit of questioning and problematizing. Developing a research habit is placing oneself in permanent confrontation with new knowledge.

Certification at the end of the course ceases to be the end of teacher education but a mere phase in the ongoing process of problem solving that characterizes the teaching profession.

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