

## PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FOR TEACHERS IN QATAR FOR EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION IN EDUCATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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Outline paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference  
Practitioner Research SIG 'International Experiences: Working with Practitioners.'  
University of Warwick, 1 September 2010

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is a progress report of the first phase (September 2009–June 2010) of an innovative action research professional education programme for teachers in Qatar, which is having considerable systemic influence in new thinking and practices in the country and beyond. It is an account of our collaborative action enquiry as we both engaged with the question, 'How do we influence the development of new epistemologies for improving education?' It is an account both of the project and of our involvement in it, as Director (Mark McCourt) and lead team member (Jean McNiff), as well as an account of our own professional learning. The paper therefore becomes a report of our personal projects within an organisational project, where the outcomes of the organisational project act as evidence for the claims made in the personal projects. We hope that this public forum at BERA will act as a validation event, when we invite the critical responses of our peers to test the validity of our claims to educational influences in learning as a key element for contributing to the success of the organisational project.

The methodology used throughout was an action research methodology so the paper takes the form of a self-study action enquiry as outlined in Whitehead (1989) and McNiff (2010a):

- What was our concern?
- Why were we concerned?
- What kind of data could we gather to show the situation as it was and as it developed?
- What could we do? What did we do?
- How do we test the validity of our claims to knowledge?
- How do we ensure that any conclusions we come to are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How do we modify our practices in light of our evaluation?

A key significance of the work is that the emancipatory nature of the methodology of self-study action research is fully vindicated through the extensive evidence base that shows how teachers are engaging critically with their own learning as the basis of improving the quality of education for staffs and students in schools. This also addresses issues raised by Donn and Al Manthri (2010) about how and why the deficit in knowledge-creating capacity in the Gulf States may be addressed. We share the views of Popper (1952) that social evolution is linked with knowledge creation; our hopes are that we are contributing to the knowledge creating capacity of the region that will inspire sustainable forms of evolution for a virtuous global social order.

### **What was our concern?**

Our concerns were reflections of what was happening at wider national and international levels, as follows.

The organisational project began in response to the implementation of Education for a New Era (ENE), a national programme in Qatar triggered by reports from the RAND Corporation (Brewer et al 2007) that recommended improving the quality of teaching in order to raise student achievement (Chapman and Miric 2009). The background to ENE was that, although Qatar is recognised as the world's second wealthiest country (CIA 2009), it is also recognised that the hydrocarbon basis of its wealth is finite, and the country needs to invest in a knowledge-based economy (Al-Sulayti 1999). Educational reform is recognised as the central pillar of the new economy (Government of Qatar Planning Council 2007). It was always recognised, however, that, although the implementation of ENE would incorporate best practices from the global community, traditional Islamic values should continue to be honoured as the basis of social life, including the education system. The Qatari government approached western agencies to provide teacher professional education programmes and consultancy services, so the challenge was how to implement programmes grounded in western values of participation and rational debate within a traditional education system characterised by mastery in rote memorisation and didactic and formulaic pedagogical practices. This, we believe, is what we did as a team.

Invitations to tender for consultancy services had been secured by other international agencies in previous years. However, the contract for the delivery of a new teacher professional education programme for 2009–2010 was secured by Tribal Education UK, an educational services provider, who would work collaboratively with the Qatar Supreme Education Council (SEC) for delivery of the programme. The Director, Mark McCourt, approached four UK Higher Education practitioners, including Jean McNiff, to provide consultancy work in different areas of expertise, and planning and materials development began in September 2009. A background team provided logistical support for the front-line delivery team. Mark and Jean later developed their working relationship in terms of forming institutional links between Tribal and York St John University, where Jean works.

### **Why were we concerned?**

Our wish to develop/be involved in the project can be explained in terms of our values, as follows:

- From a company perspective, Tribal Education exists to make a positive difference to children's learning. From a business perspective, we wished to provide a high quality and commensurably rewarded service to clients. This ensures the continuation of Tribal Education as a for-profit business as well as a not-for-profit charitable organisation (see for example <http://www.tribalgroupp.com/Aboutus/Pages/newshealthmdappointed.aspx>) and therefore provides for future opportunities to make a positive difference to the education of children throughout the world.
- Our commitments to democratic education: we believe strongly that all people should speak for themselves. We draw on the work of Arendt (1958) that all people are valuable; they occupy their own place on earth and no one can take that place. Given

this, it is individuals' responsibility to speak for themselves, and in their own voices (see Foucault's 2001 idea of *parrhesia*).

- Our commitments to personal and public accountability: we believe that each individual should offer explanations for what they are doing in the form of their living educational theories (Whitehead 1989). Given our understanding of the generative transformational nature of living systems (Chomsky 1986) and how these are manifested in organisational settings (Senge 1990, Wheatley 1999), it is then possible to see how individual accountability can transform into public accountability.

### **How do we show the situation as it was and as it developed?**

Achieving these values in practice, however, was problematic.

The aim espoused by Tribal was to deliver an action research professional development programme that would go beyond a skills-level approach to professional development and encourage a research-based approach, with emphasis on the values base of teachers and teaching. This was commensurable with the Qatari National Standards for Teachers (Supreme Education Council 2010) that position teachers as critically reflective practitioners who would produce new knowledge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A main strategy therefore became how to reconceptualise the epistemological base of teacher professionalism, from a focus on propositional knowledge to person-centred knowledge. This was accompanied by a parallel shift in pedagogies, from the transmission of information and skills to student-centred enquiry-based learning. The methodology required ongoing monitoring and evaluation of practices of the delivery team and teachers, with a special focus on the form of relationships appropriate to nurturing new forms of relational epistemologies and practices. The evaluation took the form of gathering data using a range of techniques and strategies. The data was interpreted using values as living criteria and standards of judgement (Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

However, although the planning and design of the project were reasonably straightforward, programme delivery was problematic. Some of the reasons were as follows:

- A misconception of the concept 'critical', which carries negative connotations in some Arab cultures, including Qatar: although the word is central in teacher education discourses, its possible realisation is viewed with deep suspicion by many teachers (Alazzi and Chiodo 2004).
- Previous agencies had provided so-called 'action research' programmes that focused on developing research skills, rather than on doing rigorous research, so the concept 'action research' itself was poorly theorised.
- The culture in Qatari schools mirrors the wider social culture of hierarchical management for the implementation of policy. Power relationships are also manifested in gender divides.
- Theory-practice gaps: while popular discourses speak of empowerment, care and respect, there is often distance between rhetoric and realisation.

### **What could we do? What did we do?**

The response by Tribal was to develop materials within specific theoretical frameworks, to do with understanding action research as a form of professional learning that (1) aimed to give descriptions and explanations for practice in the form of practitioners' living educational

theories (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 2009, 2010; Whitehead and McNiff 2006); (2) encouraged rigorous methodologies that included strategies for testing the validity of knowledge claims as well as the quality of practice and research (Furlong and Oancea 2005); and (3) encouraged critical reflection on practice with a view to its improvement, as recommended by, among others, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme and the General Teaching Council for England (Pollard 2010). A key aspect focused on the testing of knowledge claims in relation to values as these emerged through practice as living criteria and standards of judgement (Whitehead 2009). This rich set of materials became the core resources for the Action Research for Teachers programme, which attracted the participation of some 100 teachers from different sectors across the Qatar education system. Our own enquiry throughout focused on evaluating the extent to which we were delivering a high quality programme that would meet the criteria identified by the Qatar Supreme Education Council. Through working with colleagues in implementing the programme, their data became also our data: for example, evaluation sheets produced by course participants on the effectiveness of workshops reflected our educational influences in the learning of teachers as they developed the same kind of relational pedagogies that we modelled, in keeping with our own educational values and with traditional Islamic values.

The programme focused on requiring teachers to learn about the principles and practices of action research, and undertake a small action enquiry in their schools. The programme delivery took the form of six separate workshops for groups of teachers, organised in terms of school level and gender. These were supplemented by visits by the delivery team to individual teachers in their schools, and by teachers' participation in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), for which a specialised e-tutor was appointed. The sequence of the workshops itself took the form of an action enquiry as outlined in McNiff (2010a) and McNiff and Whitehead (2006). This also provided a structure for the teachers' action enquiries, as follows: (1) identification of research issue and formulation of research question; (2) a focus on values as reasons for the research concern; (3) gathering data to show the situation as it initially was and as it developed: identification of research participants: ethics; (4) action taken; (5) analysing and interpreting data to generate evidence in relation to articulated criteria and standards of judgement: explaining the significance of the research; (6) writing up the account for dissemination. This sequence also formed the methodological framework for our personal action enquiry, so we could keep track of the unfolding programme, along with our emerging insights and learning, using this frame. This was essential, as we all often struggled to make sense of what we were doing within a culture with whose customs and traditions we were unfamiliar. We held in high regard the capacity of the teachers and our team members to work collaboratively in creating our knowledge together, inspired by an ethic of empathic resonance (Whitehead 2009) and empathetic validity (Dadds 2008).

We gathered data using a range of techniques, to monitor what we were doing as a team, and also to monitor the teachers' progress in learning and action over the course of the programme. We asked the teachers to maintain reflective journals. Although our team did not request sight of the journals, many teachers were keen to share them for our feedback, and some posted extracts on the VLE. Many enjoyed the experience, especially for its emancipating influence in their learning, as our evidence archive reveals. The teachers and our team frequently made videos, with full permission from all participants, and some teachers posted their videos on YouTube (videos to be shown). They also produced leaflets about their action research in their schools and for dissemination at research fairs, and at the first-ever regional action research fair.

We were invited to make presentations about the project at the Action Research conference at Qatar University in June 2010 (McNiff 2010b: see Jean's keynote presentation at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HEfsRqNzWE>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P47Ln1kxikM>). At the end of the project, Tribal compiled a book of teachers' case studies, to be disseminated to all Qatar schools and to other Gulf States (Tribal Education UK 2010: see <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/qatar.asp>).

### **How do we test the validity of our claims to knowledge?**

The emphasis throughout on self-evaluation by the teachers and providers, as well as regular evaluation schedules of workshops by the teachers, and an in-project evaluation by an external agency emphasised the importance for us of ensuring quality through methodological rigour (Furlong and Oancea 2005) and through meeting identified aims and objectives. A key focus therefore was on testing the validity of emergent knowledge claims, by understanding values as living criteria and standards of judgement, as these emerged and were clarified through practice (Whitehead and McNiff 2006).

### **How do we ensure that any conclusions we come to are reasonably fair and accurate?**

We use this presentation of our paper as a validation event, where we invite the critical responses of peers to our claims that we have influenced the development of new epistemologies for practice improvement in education. We specify our living standards of judgement in relation to whether we have realised our own values of democratic participation, critical engagement in learning, and relational social practices; and in relation to Habermas's (1987) criteria of comprehensibility, authenticity, sincerity and awareness of normative backgrounds. We also draw on Lather's (1991, 1994) criteria of content validity and ironic validity; and on Winter's (1989) criteria of reflexive and dialectical critique.

### **How do we modify our practices in light of our evaluation?**

We explain how and why we are now developing similar work in other Gulf States. This is addressing the challenges of Donn and Al Manthri (see above) who raise questions about how to develop an indigenous knowledge economy that is not dependent on imported knowledge but is developing knowledge creating capacity from within. We link this with our values of *parrhesia*, the need and responsibility of all to speak for themselves in their own voices. In this way we believe we are influencing practitioners' capacity to develop a systematic and publicly-validated knowledge base that shows the processes involved in improving education as the basis of the creation of an open society for global understanding.

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