AERA 2013 Paper

Knowing Different

Abstract:

This paper challenges assumptions surrounding the development of teachers' professional knowledge and questions the value of technical-rational approaches to the improvement of educational practice. It argues that such approaches create conditions of 'hyperactivity without progress' and generate an intellectual poverty where what is valued is reduced to that which can be easily measured. Presenting findings from a qualitative three year case study the paper draws attention to socially and theoretically constructed nature of teachers' professional knowledge and the dynamics of educational improvement. These findings provide important insights into how conditions for critical dialogue can be created which recognise the importance of context and where room for argument and educational judgement can be made in the light of experience and evidence.

Objectives

The overall aim of the research was to explore how the balance of power relationships underpinning neo-liberal approaches to educational improvement could be shifted away from 'top-down' centralised prescription towards more local, evidence-informed and democratic social practices. The key objective of the study was to explore how conditions for critical dialogue might be created, capable of recognising the importance of context and where room for argument and educational judgement could be made in the light of experience and evidence.

Perspectives/Theoretical Framework

Two models of knowledge transfer and practice development in educational contexts are considered in this paper. The technical-rational model which sees knowledge as something given, unproblematic and easily transferred by simply 'cascading 'information which overlooks the substantial amounts of learning new learning involved in putting an idea into practice (Schon, 1983, Eraut 2004) and the Joint Practice Development (JPD) model (Fielding et al 2005) which sees knowledge as something jointly developed and crafted in context, tested and reviewed in the light of evidence and through intense engagement with one another and with the literature (Newman, 1873, Dewey, 1933, Andrews 2009).

Sarason's (1998) retrospective survey of educational reform in the United States drew attention to the lack of impact of technical-rational approaches to educational improvement. Sarason asked why despite over thirty years of unprecedented levels of funding in the USA which aimed to improve educational practice,

> *'...have our efforts – and they were many and expensive – met with intractability? Why should we expect that what we will now recommend will be any more effective than our past efforts?'* (Sarason1998:3)

According to Sarason this intractability, is reflective of the ways in which power relationships can structure human transactions in ways which do little to improve educational practice and seldom serve the public or educational interests.

Commenting upon a similar phenomenon in England, Coffield noted that despite political rhetoric to the contrary "the percentage of 16 year olds in full-time learning (75.4%) has been stuck on a plateau for almost 10 years."(2006,14). He also asked how if the educational system is getting so much better why is it that participation rates from students from lower socio economic groups have not increased to reflect this assertion. He argued that if the system was indeed so improved then it could be expected that such improvements would also be reflected in teachers' and learners' accounts of their experiences. On the contrary Coffield (2008,2009a,2009b,2010) found that voices of both teachers and learners repeatedly reported experiences of conflicting priorities, overly bureaucratic, 'top-down' targets pressure to conform to the imperatives of centrally prescribed curricula and narrow assessment and inspection regimes. In this way the terrors of compliance or 'perfomativity' (Ball 2003, 2004) and the tyrannies of outcomes driven funding and league tables (Elliott 2001) have been found to be detracting from rather than enhancing educational experiences.

The contrast between political and sociological understandings of the success of education reform in the USA and the English education systems are similar and striking. This raises important questions about the actuality of the situation. We argue that the difference between these viewpoints may signal the existence of problematic power relationships within education systems and which are actively hindering real and sustainable educational improvement. These appear to be operating to divert the energies and attention of teachers away from real pedagogical concerns, distorting teacher identity and pedagogy and diluting the effectiveness of educational practice, particularly for young people and adults from lower socio-economic groups.

Following (Sarason, 1998) we would argue that the same power-locked relationships appear not only to divert the energies and attention of teachers away from real pedagogical concerns but also direct scarce public funds away from pressing educational needs and social priorities. The same conditions lead politicians, policy makers and evaluators of educational policy to ignore the obvious, that opportunities for and experiences of education are not really improving for the poor and others most in need and that social mobility is in fact decreasing. They also miss the point that under current approaches to improving teaching and learning in neo-liberal education systems this situation is unlikely to change. The disconnection between political and sociological perceptions and viewpoints indicates that we may be witnessing in neo-liberal systems of education the manifestation of the phenomenon of 'change without progress' in education reform, predicted by Sarason in 1998 and observed ten years later as 'hyperactivity activity without real impact', by Coffield (2008,2009a,2009b,2010).

Fielding (2003) also noted how the technical-rational approach to education reform, coupled the language of 'performance, has come to pervade the discourse of educational reform through notions of 'impact' and 'outcomes'. The technical-rational language of 'hard outcomes' of impact he claimed have opened up some (largely superficial) possibilities but also closed down some very important others. He illustrated how this has operated to foreground 'what is short term, readily visible and easily measurable'. He also showed how the same language has marginalised qualities and phenomena which are 'complex, problematic, uneven, unpredictable, requiring patience and tenacity' in order to bring them to light. According to Fielding, such qualities and phenomena, while difficult to measure, are crucially important aspects of the social and political realities which characterise sites of change at which educational reform is directed.

For Fielding, the blunt instruments of measuring 'hard' outcomes combined with the language of impact have introduced commensurately crude, costly and in some cases very dubious measures of educational effectiveness. These are, he charged drawing us further into the machismo and the impatient mindset and practices of 'performativity' which Fielding among others (see for example Ball, 2007, 2008) argued, necessitate the construction by

teachers of defensive fabrications of 'performance' and 'compliance' in their work with potentially serious pedagogical consequences.

Fielding concluded that a different intellectual model of educational change was now needed, based upon different practical arrangements and different policies. Such a model he asserted would need to go beyond the mechanical technical-rational world view and be able to recognise that human beings are 'not just machines, not just organisms' to recognise the 'importance of acknowledging the nature of our 'human being and becoming' (ibid).

Theoretical perspectives informing the research drew upon Fielding's (2005) subsequent work and the notion of 'Joint Practice Development' (JPD) and Eraut's (2004) work on the transfer of knowledge between theoretically constructed ideas in education and their applications workplace settings.

Methods Techniques or Models of inquiry

The project adopted a qualitative case study assessment of a three year practitioner led research development project which supported teachers working in Community Colleges, Further Education Colleges, Adult Education and Training organisations. The project provided practitioners with support in order to enable them to research and improve aspects of their practice. This support was provided by the University and involved practitioners in three residential workshops on a range of issues in educational research including, research methods and literature research design and ethics and the theoretical and research background to and first principles of Joint Practice Development. Each workshop was supplemented by individual face to face and email tutorials. It also explores how and why talking about the practicalities involved in the improvement of practice openly, 'out loud and together' can help to achieve real and sustainable developments in teaching and learning beyond the expense and pretensions of 'political short-term 'quick fixes' and technical-rational models of educational improvement and transfer.

Data Sources, evidence objects or materials

Data sources included field notes from critical dialogue with research participants workshops, case studies and tutorials

Results and/or substantiated conclusions or warrants for arguments points of view

Scientific or Scholarly Significance of the study or work

This literature review offers practical insights and research-informed contributions which may be of use to political, policy and educational professionals interested in exploring different approaches to the evaluation and improvement of educational practice. The scholarly significance of the work resides in its illumination of how conditions for critical dialogue can be created in more democratic and sustainable waysto support the development of teachers' professional knowledge and the improvement of educational practice. These include,

1. Allowing practitioners to identify an aspect of teaching and learning that they see to be in most need of improvement in the local context.
2. Establishing a community of research and practice where practitioners and members of the University teacher education teams can work alongside each other to explore the 'problem', weigh up possible solutions and identify the impact of actions taken.
3. Supporting practitioners in critically engaging with relevant educational research and literature encouraging the development of social and intellectual capital

4. Accepting a realistic appreciation of the amount of time and support needed to think carefully and openly about the 'problem' and its possible solutions together with opportunities to test these out and evaluate them in practice in the light of experience and evidence.
5. Providing spaces to think and talk where there is room for a 'good' argument The distinctive features of a good argument are that it is well-informed, makes space for a multiplicity of perspectives in, and experiences of, the situation. Good argument also looks to theory and research to understand what is happening and carefully considers the consequences of choosing a given option. Good argument also leaves room for the judgements made, to be examined and re-examined in the light of emerging evidence and unfolding situations and consequences, so that future action can be adapted in context in the light of further experience and evidence.

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