Encouraging the role of teacher researcher by including teachers in the research project and the influence on learning

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Abstract

Research work plays an important role in EU documents as well as in our national documents. This is one of the reasons why the Slovene Ministry of Education and Sport invited tenders for the project Partnership between Faculties and Schools, funded by the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Education and Sport. One of the models of this project, at the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education Koper, which started in the year 2006, focuses on the research process.
In the article we describe this model and present teachers’ opinions about the first seminar. The results of 20 participants of the first seminar in May 2006 show that the majority of them are women with several years of work experience and with high qualifications. The reason they joined the project was to observe the importance of co-operative learning. They do not, however, see any direct connection between the knowledge acquired at the seminar and their immediate work. One of the observed weaknesses of the seminar has been that most of the participants joined upon the encouragement of school headmasters so that it is mainly external and not internal motivation that drives them.
The initial results will serve as guidelines for future work.

KEY WORDS
co-operative learning, lifelong learning, communication, research work, partnership between faculties and schools

INTRODUCTION

Research work plays an important role in today’s world. We can read: “In this “globalised” world, research and technological development are advancing rapidly thanks to the exchanges of researchers, information and scientific results, all of which are circulating from one country to another more and more freely and swiftly.” (Towards a European Research Area, 2005: 2) From among the priorities for lifelong learning strategies, the European Commission working document with the title European Area of Lifelong Learning (2002) stresses the “support research into innovative pedagogy for teachers, instructors and mediators, while taking account of the growing role of information and communication technologies.” Thus many EU documents as well as our national documents (for example: the Resolution on National Research and Development Program for the Period from 2006-2010, 2006, and the proposal of the Declaration on the Guidelines for the Work of the Republic of Slovenia in EU Institutions in Year 2006, 2006) stress the importance of research work.

To create the new co-operative approach to learning in our constantly changing society (Towards a European Research Area, 2005:1), the Slovene Ministry of Education and Sport invited tenders for the project Partnership between Faculties and Schools, funded by the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Education and Sport. One of the models of this
project, which started in the year 2006, focuses on the research process and is entitled Research of Teaching Practice and the Direct Use of its Results in Teaching.

The project involves several Slovene educational institutions, one of them being the University of Primorska, Faculty of Education Koper. The project is now in progress.

In the article we would like to present the theoretical background which supports our project as well as some of the results and problems connected with it.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In designing the project, we took into account various baseline points. Some of them originate from the European documents, as for example bonding or partnership, ICT use, lifelong learning, ongoing evaluation; others from different theories: emphasis on written and not only on oral communication and co-operative learning. All of these were then brought together to help achieve the principal goal which was learning or professional and personality development.

Let us examine these starting points.

1. The title of the project is partnership. According to a range of perspectives on partnership, for example university-school partnerships, school-community-business partnership and collaborations among three or more institutions (Franks and Hookey, 1999), our project focuses on the collaboration among the faculty and schools as well as other schools institutions (in continuation schools), on the collaboration among schools and cooperation within individual schools.

In terms of various forms of cooperation or partnership, we have designed three different networks at three levels:
1. at the level of individual school,
2. among schools and
3. between schools and the faculty.

All of the above intertwine and do not exclude one another.

2. Since one of the priorities of the European Union is the application of modern technology (The Concrete Future Objectives of Education System, 2001), the collaboration between the described networks, especially the second one (among schools) and the third (between schools and the faculty), should not only represent direct communication but also a virtual one based on modern technology. For this purpose we created a special web page where all the materials and reports are to be found and which enables e-communication. We trained the faculty teachers and the school teachers in the use of ICT.

3. At all three levels we applied co-operative learning, which serves as support for professional and personality development of the participants. Co-operative learning is actually upgraded individual learning, which is most suitable for our project because it results in the acquisition of useful and permanent knowledge. It also offers the possibility of informal learning, assessment and complementing of knowledge.

4. In addition, co-operative learning focuses on the development of communication. The connections within schools and among schools require specific communication skills,
traditional or personal, written and oral, and the use of ICT, which represents added value. If we take as an example only the faculty teachers, the consequences of their inclusion in the project are visible in the increased quantity of information being exchanged not only through ICT but also at regular monthly meetings intended for the exchange of opinions and ideas, for a joint preparation of materials, discussions about evaluation results, planning of work, acquainting each other about one’s work, etc.

Research groups at individual institutions also need to focus on communication, be it oral or written, since they will have to present the results in written form on a poster and in an article.

5. The next starting point is learning within the research process. The concept of scientific research which is in Slovenia understood as creative and systematic work contributing to the enhancement of knowledge and to its practical application (Research and Development, 2004, Bassey, 1995) has been expanded to the understanding of research as a learning strategy strongly influencing the professional lives of teachers, even motivating them for their profession (Brown and Dowling, 1998).

Although the idea of teacher researcher, as it was introduced in England by Stenhouse, then further developed by Elliot and Adelman as well as others (for example Lewin, Kemmis and McTaggart) is not a new one, it is considered by many experts as the strategy strongly influencing the professional lives of teachers in our school arena although not very popular in comparison with other learning strategies (Cencič, 2006).

We have already mentioned research as one of the possible strategies of professional development. In our school practice, however, research is actually more widespread as a teaching model (Joyce and Well, 1986) and as an instruction strategy (Strmčnik, 2003), especially in subjects like natural sciences and technology. We might not be sufficiently aware that teachers can only include research into their instruction if they have personal experience on the subject. I therefore thoroughly agree with the common understanding that teachers need skills as well as knowledge of a certain subject area which they want to present to their pupils. This means that they should have the possibility to test themselves in research, not only in theoretical research but also and above all in the research of practice. Next to successfully initiating pupils into research, research also represents a learning process. Thus Schon says (1983) that when a practitioner becomes a researcher of his/her own practice, he/she is engaged in a continuous process of self-education.

6. Schon’s words indicate a link between research and professional learning or professional development. Although various concepts are applied, such as professional development (Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon, 1996), continuing professional development (Day 1999), professional growth (Kagan, 1992) or professional learning in connection with lifelong learning (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, 2002), the focus always remains on informal learning in a relaxed environment, the result of which is sustainable and comprehensive knowledge. This in turn impacts the professional as well as personality development of the individual. (Schalekamp and Krige, 2002, Wilkins, 1997).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
The basis of the project is the development and intertwining of various connections and partnerships.
1. The cooperation among the institutions has already been mentioned. Before the start of the project we had applications from 18 institutions, mainly from the Primorska region (from the coast and the region of Goriska), and only a few from the rest of Slovenia. Due to the difficulties with the staff, one of the institutions from the coast area withdrew from the project after a few months. The institutions are monitored by the Faculty of Education in Koper.

2. The next integration is one of knowledge and action. The knowledge is acquired formally, at the seminars. We have planned four seminars in form of workshops, which should provide the teaching staff with the basic knowledge of research, from data collection and processing to the writing of research reports. The seminars are intended for the leaders of school internal research teams, two from each school. The knowledge acquired at seminars, together with the individual knowledge as well as the knowledge from group studies should then be applied in the research of a concrete problem from practice.

3. The project brings together various school staff. The collaboration takes place within the faculty, where there is usually not much communication among the teaching staff, within schools themselves, where teacher cooperate in team planning and instruction, and there is the continuation or renewed contact between the university staff and practicing teachers. Contacts between university teachers and future teachers end as the latter complete their studies, therefore the project tries to renew and upgrade this relationship. We have tried to include in this cooperation network also our undergraduate students, who participate at the seminars as observers or assistants collecting data and processing it as part of ongoing evaluation.

4. Teachers frequently criticise permanent professional training, claiming that it is too theoretical and providing them with not very useful knowledge, therefore the project aims to join theoretical knowledge with empirical findings. The training we designed is practical and focused on the research of concrete issues. The teachers of the faculty presented some of the possible topics and tried to arouse the practitioners’ interest.

Every school formed a group led by two members. The groups vary in size. Our recommendations for the group size were up to five members yet some have eight. Each group chose one of the research topics which ranged from mother tongue, mathematics, and ICT to professional and personality development. If an institution decided they wanted to work on a different topic, we would ask an outside expert for assistance.

There are four university teachers involved in the project. Since we intend to publish some materials (brochure, poster, and the journal of proceedings) we have also invited a designer to join us.

The project, which will go on for one year, will be concluded with a presentation of individual researches and their results on posters. The best research will be published.

According to the project plan, we carried out a short evaluation in May.

INITIAL PART EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN FACULTIES AND SCHOOLS: MODEL IV

The aim of this evaluation was to find out who the participants were, and their opinion about the impact of acquired knowledge on the professional and personal development. We also wanted to hear their proposals and wishes as well as establish the possible deficiencies of the model.
The information was collected during the first workshop in May 2006. Teachers and other school workers who attended the seminar were asked to fill in an evaluation form which was a combination of closed and open questions. Another technique for gaining data was the unstructured observation of the workshop performed by a student and the discussion between project leaders.

The first seminar was attended by fewer teachers than expected. There were only 20 participants because only one representative from each school came and not two as we had planned. There were also some institutions that did not send anybody at all and did not even explain why. The participants were mainly women. There were two men, both of them in leading positions in their school: one headmaster and one deputy headmaster. The participating teachers were mainly from primary schools (14), 4 from kindergartens, one from a special school and one from a school kindergarten. The majority had university education (10), 5 higher and 5 high level of education. As for professional titles, 8 had the title of school counsellors, 7 were mentors, 3 without title and 2 were senior counsellors (highest title in school). Their position in school was the following: 8 of them were teachers, 5 kindergarten assistants, two school advisers, two headmasters, one early years teacher in a special school, and a mobile special teacher. The participants had from 3 to 31 years of work experience, with 19 year average in education. The sample was a heterogeneous one, although primary school teachers prevailed. The majority had university education with high ranking education titles of counsellor and mentor and they all had several years of work experience in education.

At the seminar we tried to avoid lectures and direct knowledge presentation. The approach we took was an indirect one, based on discussion or debate and on individual work. Nor was the topic of the project didactic or intended for a specific participant group, which might have been the reason why two participants claimed that they would not use the acquired knowledge for their work. The rest of the participants saw at least indirect connection with their work and they said that they would apply the acquired knowledge to their work to a medium or high degree (12 participants), some only a little (5), while one person did not provide any answer.

The participants did not see any possibility of direct transfer of acquired knowledge into practice. They could not perceive that research might be used as a teaching method or strategy. The reason might have been the fact that not all of them were using research as a teaching model or strategy in their lessons. Since research results were not yet available they could not as yet transfer them into practice. In spite of this, almost half of the participants (9) wrote that they would be able to improve their work on the basis of the acquired knowledge. 7 of them were not sure about it, while two of them mentioned that the knowledge would not help them improve their work. As for understanding research, one of the participants wrote that the seminar did not help him understand research any better, the majority (12) claimed they understood it better or a lot, the rest only a little better. Research is a process where one can learn best through active learning in the process itself. The knowledge, however, which is acquired indirectly but is then not used, cannot give us the feeling that we know something or that we are able to do things.

The baseline of the project was co-operative learning and communication among colleagues, which was also observed by the participants, and the majority (14) stated that they would present the acquired knowledge to their colleagues, while 4 of them said they would do that only partly.
Since we were interested in comprehensive teacher development, we were satisfied that more than half of the participants claimed that knowledge impacted their personal growth and development. Only one of them disclaimed this.

Of interest is also the information about who encouraged them to join the project. Only 9 participants decided to join out of their own wish, 8 on the wish of the school administration and three on the basis of both. The predominating external desire to join the project was the consequence of the fact that the seminar promised a reward in the form of points which help teachers to faster promotion in their work. For active participation teachers also expect the maximum number of points. Because of the predominating external motivation, project leaders are now faced with the problem of how to develop the internal motivation of the participants so that the latter would neither feel the involvement in the project as a burden nor work performed solely for the points. The participation in the project should rather be experienced as a possibility of learning and all round development, as was stated by one participant: “It is my great wish that the seminar would offer many useful experiences for each and every individual and for the school staff as a whole.”

Criticism was expressed about the organisation of the project. Since there are two models of the project Partnership between Faculties and Schools at the Faculty of Education in Koper, which run parallel, there was an exchange of participants, while some joined both models. We believe it would be better if the teachers joined only one of the two. There was also the problem connected with individual work in the computer classroom, where difficulties arose because some of the participants who did not apply beforehand came to this specific part of the seminar without prior application, and also because one group finished work sooner than others. We need to improve the organisation and we have to choose a day that would prove more appropriate than did Friday afternoon. This might be difficult since headmasters do not want teachers to miss their morning lessons, while teachers do not wish to have a working day encroach upon their free time.

We perceived that the teachers with prior knowledge about research showed more interest for cooperation than complete beginners in this field, who expressed fear and anxiety about how the work would proceed. This shows that research is not a widely spread teaching strategy and is not well-known among teachers. Younger teachers are better informed about research. We hope that the materials we are planning to publish (brochure and poster) will contribute at least partly to a greater understanding about research.

A VIEW AHEAD
More effort will certainly have to be invested if research is to be brought closer to teachers, especially those who are not as yet acquainted with it. Here, younger teachers with some experience in the area can be of great help. Since many older teachers with almost no knowledge of research are involved in the project model, more direct guidance will also be necessary.

We intend to use research approaches typical for a post-modern society. Thus, there will be fewer traditional approaches and more modern ones, which is possible due to qualitative research, special action research or case studies, used most by teacher researchers.

“Action research is an approach to school improvement that honours teachers’ professionalism. Individually, and in groups, teachers identify questions about their
practice, make appropriate changes, and collect data to discover the impact of those changes." (Couture and Delong, 1999: 6)

In order to experience research as the tool that can help to understand practice better and can contribute to the solution of its problems, the research topics were chosen by the teachers themselves, which, we believe, will enhance their motivation.

The most difficult task in developing internal motivation, however, will be to develop the importance of constant learning, which is far more difficult to achieve because it requires changes of values and attitudes.

We are planning to include in later evaluation also some interviews in order to get a more comprehensive insight into the project theme as well as for in-depth research.

We see a great contribution to the success of the project in the interdisciplinary formation of research groups, which enables the collaboration of early years teachers, lower and higher primary school teachers, teachers of secondary schools and other educational institutions as well as co-operative learning and communication among co-workers/colleagues teaching at various levels and occupying different positions in schools, from headmasters to teachers.

CONCLUSION
The model uses the concept of teacher researcher, first used by Elliott and Adelman, with life-long learning as its primary goal. We believe the research to be one of the learning strategies closely linked to co-operative learning, which helps to develop communication skills. In modern times this is only possible through the use of ICT. The following picture depicts all these connections.
REFERENCES
A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (2000).