From Personal Initiatives to Formal Policy: The Process of Adopting Individual’s Ideas for Practicum and Turning them into an Official Approach

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1. Introduction
"Oranim" Academic School of Education is situated in the northern part of Israel. At the time the school offered five pre-service programs: Early Childhood Education; Elementary School Education; Special Needs Education; Art Education and Programs for Bedouin Educators. Practicum is a central component within teacher education. The various programs, carried out in more than 100 schools and 100 kindergartens, make the School-College discourse, an ongoing dynamic dialogue.
Throughout the years individual staff members developed a variety of partnership patterns, including P.D.S (Professional Development School) model, motivated by the unsatisfactory results of the existing models, new identified needs at school, gaps between academy and school in the concepts of teacher education and the need to make better use of the students' time at school. The various models were developed through an intensive teamwork and high extent of autonomy given to teams and individuals they lacked, however, a common concept and shared vision to lead and support them.
In the year 2004 the School of Education established a discussion group, composed of teacher educators, representing all the teaching programs mentioned above. The purpose of the group was an in depth study of the issue of partnership, amalgamating the individual experiences into a common concept without blurring the uniqueness of each model and set criteria to foster the existing models and develop new ones.
We discovered that despite the differences between the various models, they were all based on similar viewpoints, assumptions, and visions regarding the role of Practicum in the program.
We also found similarities in the difficulties and problems faced by teacher educators in the different sites.
The group served as a professional development team as well as a support group for its' participants. After two years of conducting in-depth study meetings, the team wrote a position paper and presented it to Oranim College Board in order to gain official recognition for the emerging policy.
This paper focuses on the organizational process of turning individual initiatives into formal policy (rather than on the content of the specific models developed in the college). We describe the direction of the change (bottom-up), and the stages it went through from sporadic experiments to recognized and guiding policy.
The theoretical background will include three facets of the subject process:
1. Leading a change in Higher Education Institutions;
2. Staff Development as inherent part of change;
3. Practicum within Teacher Education programs;
The nature of the paper is descriptive. It will present the stages and the steps we went through, the hurdles on the way and further directions to be studied and developed.

2. Literature review
Due to various processes influencing the leading values in many of the western societies and different reforms concerning educational systems in many countries, state of change has become an ongoing reality in educational institutions and is therefore a subject for increasing
amount of research (Fullen, 1991; Bush et al. 1999; Ramsden, 1998; Fuchs, 1995; Knight & Trowler, 2001; Fridman, 2000; Volansky, 2004 and others). The limited scope of this paper will enable us to just briefly review three components playing role in this area: change in Higher Education Institutions; change as collegial process and as part of staff development and changes in the concept of the discussed area - practicum within teacher education programs.

2.1. Leading change in academic institutions
The field of academic management in Higher Education institutions is relatively young (Middlehurst & Elton, 1993; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Bone & Bourner, 1998; Ramsden, 1998) and writers point to lack of theoretical base to lead it (Middlehurst & Elton, 1993). External and internal changes are forcing the academic community to face this challenge and to see it as a crucial mean of surviving the turbulent times it goes through (Ramsden, 1998; Middlehurst & Elton, 1993). Middlehurst & Elton (ibid. 1993) portray a model of 'check and balance', a kind of 'spontaneous corrective action' (ibid. p. 254) occurring within a community of highly educated and committed members enabling its survival despite the lack of systematic working process. Bush (1995) expands that definition and writes that the 'ambiguity model' is characteristic to Higher Education Institutions. Researchers agree that both for external and internal changes influencing the Higher Education organizations, a more systematic and professional attitude has to be taken. Basically faculty members view academic management as an inhibiting factor in the way of their academic development and personal promotion. Their main identity lies within research activities rather than managerial ones (Golan, 2003). Thus in many cases they tend to percept their managerial incumbency as temporary obligation rather than as a professional challenge to tackle.

Writers point to several models (Kazar, 1998; Middlehurst & Elton, 1993) as suitable models for the management of academic institutions. They call for a comprehensive rethinking of this area as crucial part of succeeding to cope with intensive changes. At present in many cases the picture seems to reflect stage of transition from ambiguous models to more structured ones. In state of ambiguity or spontaneous corrective actions changes happen rather than being foreseen, planned or lead. In many cases they are initiated by individuals or teams in the organization and later adopted as policy (Serlin et al. 2006). In all cases and models making changes happen depends to a large extent on the ability to create consensus around ideas. Therefore the process has to include the facet of staff development both as teams of subsystems and as committed individuals. This will be the focus of the next part.

2.2. Staff development as part of professional development
Central place is imparted to teamwork in the discussion about educational leadership and educational change at all levels of educational institutions (Middlehurst, 1993; O'Neill, 1997). Staff development is one facet, or sometime preferred strategy, of professional development for individuals and organizations. The pre-assumption underpinning this notion lies within the belief that the individual and the organization will benefit from sharing and creating knowledge (Bush, 1995; Serlin et al., 2006), and that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts. It also presumes that collaboration lays the foundation for common visions and has the potential to help promote it (Middlehurst & Elton 1993). Collaboration between school teams and teacher educator's teams, partners who partly work for the same mission, suggests a promising combination between the academic and the field, the practical and the theoretical knowledge bases of the profession (Ariav & Smith 2006). Both teams have separate and common interests and frames of work. In both cases the main aim is to improve the teaching profession as well as the student teacher's and the pupil's performances. O'Neill (1997) notes that "the concept of 'the team' is now firmly imbedded in the educational
management literature" (ibid. p. 77) but one has to examine it with regard to the context of the organizational occurrences and the specific issue being dealt with in order to determine whether it really improves the professional management and the defined targets. The sense of commitment and involvement of staff members is a precondition for any development and it carries high potential of enhancing management practice and promoting personal and institutional effectiveness. Autonomy and collegiality are mentioned as most essential ingredients for individual and staff development (ibid. 1997). Researchers suggest mixture of learning strategies to be used to enhance professional development through teams (Middlewood, 1997). Acquiring, sharing and creating knowledge with the aim of crystallizing stands to lead policy are central within this area. The process should include a mixture of well planned and systematically led meetings, with personal contributions and occasional learning. In the next paragraph we will present some of the changes relating to practicum in Teacher Education Programs.

2.3. Practicum within Teacher Education Programs

There is quite a wide agreement among researchers dealing with teacher education that practicum is a most influential component of the program (Smith & Soenk, 1996; Lev-Ari & Smith, 2004; Silberstein et.al, 2006; Golan & Nof 2006). Student teachers also claim that it has changed their professional concept and reduced the tension associated with entry to class (Ariav & Smith, 2006). Field experience supports the acquisition of the different kinds of knowledge required for teaching and helps connecting theory and practice (ibid. 2006).

Unlike the relatively wide consensus concerning the required knowledge and skills for the teaching profession, there is still an open question regarding the best ways of acquiring it and one can discern the existence of different models and structures of teacher education programs and the practicum within them.

Bak (2001) describes three different focuses in field experience: the first puts in the center the experienced teacher ('find me a teacher'), the second focuses on the class as the site of study ('give me a class'), and the third puts the whole school in the heart of acquiring theoretical and practical knowledge and skills ('connect me to a school'). Each model stresses different concepts in the way of becoming a teacher but in either case it is likely that the effectiveness of field experience will increase if based on collaborative and joint efforts of all participants at school and in teacher education institutions.

Holmes Report (Holms Group, 1995) pointed to that component too noting that the effectiveness of field experience depends to a large extent on the school's and teacher's education innovative thinking and that the concept of practicum should be based on parallel processes of professional development.

That idea penetrated into the educational systems and in recent years various models of partnership between schools and teacher education institutions were developed (NCATE, 2001). One of the leading models is the P.D.S (Professional Development Schools). The idea of P.D.S. puts the professional benefit of all participants in the center. It serves the concept of life long learning, the need to create and foster continuum professional development and the need to create conditions for that to occur both at school and in the academy (Feiman-nemser, 2000; Ariav and Smith, 2006). It also presume that teachers have central role in the promotion of learning and major efforts should be diverted to them (Ariav and Smith, 2006). P.D.S. is based on a comprehensive view of teacher education and school improvement and on integration between academic-professional and practical-professional knowledge and thus it encapsulates the potential to overcome many hurdles that stand in the way of promoting the educational system (ibid. 2006).

In this chapter we reviewed some of the problems characterizing academic management in Higher Education Institutions and standing in the way of leading systematic changes; we
pointed to the potential contribution and the crucial role of staff development and team work in such changes and we mentioned several changes occurring in the way of making good use of the practicum component in Teacher Education Programs. In the next chapter we shall outline the context of the process.

3. The context of the change

The process to be described took place at Oranim – Academic School of Education, between the years 2004-2006. It included representatives from the five Teacher Education Programs preparing teachers for five different target areas/professions: Kindergarten; Elementary School; Special Education, Art Education and Bedouin systems. Each has different curriculum content wise but share similar structure. Scope of practicum is common to all programs but different patterns were designed according to the differences in professional requirements, educational systems and individual's concepts. Each program team has a leading staff involving the pedagogical instructors/counselors who are responsible for the design of the curriculum for didactic, pedagogic and practical studies. The teams meets on a regular basis once a week, the meetings are part of the members' curricular activity. Each staff member belongs to three different working circles which meet regularly in different frequency: the teachers of each specific year; the whole program team and teacher educators from all the programs in the faculty of education.

The prevailing culture is most collaborative. Curriculums are discussed in details among colleagues and there is a combination of autonomy (academic freedom), and collaboration (knowledge creating and sharing). The described change started from sporadic initiatives. The direction of the process was 'bottom-up'. It reacted to emerging ideas aiming at confronting them with theoretical background and amalgamating them to leading policy. The decision to turn this course of action into systematic process was taken by the Dean of Education Faculty and conducted by the College's Head of Field Experience (which was nominated at that time).

In the next chapter we will describe the sequence and the content of each stages of the change/process.

4. The sequences of the process: Stages of the change

In this chapter we shall portray the stages of the change in detail. In order to give a comprehensive view of the process we will refer to managerial as well as to conceptual components. We will do that in a chronological manner.

a) The situation before the comprehensive change – various models of partnership were developed in the college throughout the years. Their structure and nature varied according to the differences in the college teaching programs, the educational systems and the school/Kindergarten environment in which practicum took place. Albeit the differences among the models they were all based on similar concepts regarding the desired directions in teacher education programs, and the concept of the role that the schools/Kindergartens have to play within it. It also appeared that teacher educators representing the different programs shared common difficulties whilst striving to enhance changes in the traditional relationship between academy and school.

b) Conducting researches and study sessions to examine the immerging models - two of the partnership programs were followed by research and one involved intensive study sessions with the participation of teacher educators and kindergarten teacher. The findings of both pointed to the need of reinforcing the links between the school and the teacher education programs, they also suggested to concentrate in fewer schools/Kindergarten and to find more areas for the professional encounters. The findings of these researches helped develop new directions and improve the already existing models (Serlin et.al 2006). The lack of collaboration among teams and individuals on the campus and the lack of common
leading concept called to join efforts and create a working group for studying and promoting the issue of partnership. This obliged an organizational change: the nominee of a new position – a College Head of Practicum.

c) Strategic step: nominee of new position – the range of practicum sites, the importance and the complexity of the connections with them and the need to lead discern policy obliged the nominee of a new position: Head of Practicum. The new position was meant to cover lacunae in the organization without threatening incumbent position holders. The role definition of the new post included responsibility for pedagogical instructors' professional development, for conducting the college-educational systems connections and for leading a systematic process of practicum policy.

d) Establishing a group discussion, mapping the terrain – the first step was to establish a group discussion representing the different models and programs. The readiness to take part in it highlighted a real need for support and study. The group met regularly for two years and conducted peer study based on the gathered experiences and professional literature. The by-product appeared to be twofold; reducing the sense of loneliness and producing documents and papers.

e) The aims of the group – the group defined five aims: 1) Studying the relevant literature and broadening the theoretical base regarding partnerships on the whole and P.D S. in particular; 2) Designing criteria for P.D.S based on the literature and the local models; 3) Discussing problems and dilemmas deriving from partnership; 4) Crystallizing a common leading concept for the college; 5) Presenting the concept to Faculty Management and the College Board and accept their recognition and approval as leading policy. The group led regular meeting for two years and completed the whole process. The next step was the presentation.

f) Disseminating the accumulated knowledge within the college – the group wrote a joint position paper in which it sets the pre-assumptions for partnership, the key-concepts, and the pre-conditions steering and enabling the planning, conducting and assessing partnerships. The paper was presented to the Faculty and to the College Board and was approved and adopted as a leading policy by both. The meaning of that process was that there was an intentional transition from separated units to collaboration among them.

g) Disseminating the accumulated knowledge within the professional community outside the college - The College Head of Practicum and the college group took part in the writing of a chapter of a book dedicated the story of partnerships in Israel. Oranim school of Education has a central chapter in that book describing "The Multi Facets of Partnerships" in the college. The process of turning the committed and devoted individuals to committed and devoted team is widely documented in it.

Several processes occurred within the described change, deriving from one another: individual initiatives were openly discussed in a participatory manner; Communalities concerning the vision and the concept were defined and crystallized into a leading concept; The concept was presented and recognized by colleagues within the faculty of education and by the college management; The accumulated knowledge was disseminated in and outside the college and in and outside the country.

At present we concentrate on the improvement of teacher education aspects and the nature of relationship between the partners. In some cases, especially in the Bedouin and the Special Education models which were pupils oriented, we can point to influences of the change on the pupils' achievements. We can clearly point to changes in the nature of relationship between the college and the educational systems and to changes in the curriculum of the practicum and the curriculum of courses taught on campus. Those changes were based on mutual awareness of the differences between the two institutions, regarding their ethos, culture and commitments. Those gaps create difficulties on the way of conducting the partnership and set
high demands on the ones who mediate and lead it, teacher educator and school teachers. On the other hand both sides share interest and concern to the quality of future teacher and are ready to raise their contribution to that mission. The various teams on campus, the Faculty Management and the Board of College approved of the described change but did not yet translated it to resource allocation. Going on implementing the P.D.S. model and widening it will obviously require resources, the deep budget cuts that the whole education system undergoes these days might endanger the continuation of the change and may force us to be creative in joining with other bodies and communities in order to maintain it's momentum.

5. Concluding remarks
The individual's motivations to change the nature of practicum derived from a sense of dissatisfaction from the existing models, from the desire to try new directions, from the encounter with updated professional literature, from changing needs at school and from changing vision of teacher education. Individual teacher educators and teams initiated a variety of changes aimed at improving the utilizing of that component in the program. The increasing number of models and the growing complexity of the dialogue with the field called for an overall examination and re-conceptualization of the issue. The process was a kind of 'bottom-up' and 'joining for leading' one, and the group discussion served as professional development group as change initiator, as knowledge disseminators and as support group. A lot still lies ahead, waiting to be done and researched. We shall note some of it:

- The conceptual recognition should be translated to resource allocation.
- Partnership should go beyond the school fence. Social involvement within a specific community should be build as part of the teacher education mission.
- Research activities should grow and involve all participants.
- The changes in the curriculum should go beyond the practical oriented components of the program and include the theoretical studies of the profession.

These are some of our planned steps for the near future. All are most challenging and not easy to accomplish under the present circumstances.

References


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