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DEVELOPING RESEARCH CAPACITY THROUGH PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

Abstract

This paper reports on a planned, professional, postgraduate diploma that aims to develop educators and education officials professionally towards policy making and at the same time bring about transformation in the students' work environment. In order to focus particularly on this aim and also to instil reflexive practices, we will focus on two empowering approaches, namely action research and appreciative enquiry, in addition to the generic research topics that have always been included in previous post-graduate research training in the Faculty of Education. Research at various levels is required throughout any policy process, and thus we planned to infuse the coursework with tasks in which students will need to use and further develop a variety of research skills. The students' ability to use the skills and knowledge that they acquired in the programme, in their own work contexts towards change will be assessed by means of a capstone research project.

Background

The South African education system has experienced many challenges over the years. While great strides have been made since 1994 in terms of policy development, providing infrastructure and including learners in a unified education provision model, the vision of quality education is still unattained. For instance, it was reported, based on the countrywide Annual National Assessments, that 35% of learners in Grade 3 cannot read (*Rapport*, 2014) while Jansen (*Sunday Times*, 2014) expressed his concern that 500 000 of learners who enrolled for Grade 1 in 2002, never sat for the final Grade 12 examination in 2013.

One of the key barriers to quality education is the ability of educators and education managers to cope in the ever-changing policy landscape in South Africa, and to effectively bring about change in line with the transformation agenda of the country. In this regard Vos et al. (2012, p. 67) argue that the "behaviour of principals as well as educators... [do] not contribute positively towards the development and establishment of an effective organisational climate". Phasa (2010, p. 177) calls for capacity building amongst teachers and school managers and a "philosophical shift from an individual to a system approach" that cannot simply be done in isolated training sessions. Yet, while many teachers have enrolled for formal qualifications at higher education institutions over the past 20 years, it has not been successful in terms of its impact on schools (Ngidi et al., 2010).

Qualifications in South Africa are positioned on a 10-level National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as detailed in the *National Qualifications Act (67/2008): Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF)* (RSA, 2014). In order to transform and regulate teacher education, the *National Qualifications Framework Act (67/2008): Revised policy on the minimum requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ)* (RSA, 2015) was

promulgated in line with the HEQSF. *Inter alia* it requires all teacher education programmes to (RSA, 2015, pp. 8-9):

... address the critical challenges facing education in South Africa today ... by incorporating situational and contextual elements that assist teachers in developing competences that enable them to deal with diversity and transformation.

Topping the level 7 initial degree for pre-service teachers (BEEd), on a postgraduate level, three new professional qualifications, namely a Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDip) (level 8), a professional Masters in Education (level 9) and a professional Doctorate in Education (level 10) were included aiming to improve education in the country through formal qualifications. This paper reports on the envisaged research capacity building integrated in the *PGDip in Education Policy* programme that we developed.

Policy framework for teacher qualifications

The PGDip serves to strengthen and deepen educators' knowledge in a particular field of education. The primary purpose of the PGDip as stipulated in the *Revised policy on the minimum requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (RSA, 2015) is to "enable working professional educators to involve themselves in advanced reflection and development by means of a systematic survey of current thinking, practice and research methods in an area of specialisation in their profession, or in a sub-field of education" (p. 42). The PGDip demands a "high level of theoretical engagement and intellectual independence" (p. 42). While a sustained research project is not obligatory, it is stated that "the qualification may include conducting and reporting on research under supervision" (p. 42). This 120 credit programme has to resonate with the specific level descriptors of the qualification authority (SAQA, 2012). It requires students to engage "in an area at the forefront of a field" (p. 10), understand research methodologies relevant to the field, be able to "interrogate multiple sources of knowledge" (p. 10) and "evaluate knowledge and processes of knowledge production" (p. 10). Students are required to address ethical issues "based on critical reflection" (p. 11), "critically review information gathering, synthesis of data, evaluation and management processes in specialised contexts in order to develop creative responses to problems and issues" (p. 11) and to communicate "creative insights, rigorous interpretations and solutions to problems and issues appropriate to the context" (p. 11). All of these imply research in the professional context.

In order to understand the rationale for *the PGDip in Education Policy*, we need to consider the policy process (PP) and the context of policy making in South Africa.

The policy making process

Policies are usually developed in response to a particular need (Pillay, 2006). The process is cyclical and involves *agenda setting, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, policy evaluation and policy review*. Research of various kinds is required throughout the PP. Thus while policy making is part of the professional work of those involved, research skills are required in this professional

environment (Putt & Springer, 1989). Pillay (2006, p. 453) clearly comment in this regard that in “changing societies such as South Africa, policies are continually being revised and replaced. ... Good-quality research is essential to guide policy-making”. It is thus clear that the policy maker require professional knowledge and skills, as well as the capability to do research.

In South Africa policies are made at three levels in the education context: National Policies are made in line with the Constitution and other education and general legislation, by the Minister of Education. The nine provinces then develop provincial policies in line with the national policies, taking the particular needs of the province into account. At school level, the School Governing Body (comprising parents, teaching staff, non-teaching staff and school learners) is required to develop school policies within the particular context of the school. It is thus evident that a need exist to capacitate educators and education officials at various levels to understand the policy making process, the legal framework within which the policies should be made and how to conduct appropriate research towards developing policies.

Conceptualisation of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Policy

Based on the challenges faced in education in South Africa and steered by the guidelines supplied in the documents discussed above (and the drafts that preceded them), we asked the question: *What programme can we design that will build research capacity, professionally develop educators and educator officials towards policy making and at the same time bring about change in students' work contexts?* We thus demarcated the programme outcome as follows:

On completion of the PGDip in Education Policy Studies, graduates will be able to critically read, interpret and deliberate national and provincial education legislation and policy. Informed by democratic values, they will apply knowledge, practice skills and demonstrate attitudes that will enable them to follow policy processes to bring about socially responsive piecemeal¹ transformation within their work contexts.

The different coursework modules were aimed to progress from the general to the particular. We started with international education systems, then to the education system of the student's country and finally to the student's own context. The coursework modules comprise the following:

- Education systems
- Foundations of education law and policy
- Legislative and policy framework for education in South Africa
- Professional context: policy for transformed practice in education
- Policy and management processes for responsive transformation in education

In addition to the above coursework modules and a generic module on education theory, the students receive research training and have to embark on a capstone project where they have to research their own practice towards change.

¹ This term was coined by Karl Popper in his *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, first printed in London by Routledge in 1945, and represents something being done piece by piece or in small steps.

Research capacity building through training

Linked with the need to bring about transformation in education, in addition to generic research topics that are taught in the current postgraduate programmes, we focused on approaches to research that build capacity, reflexivity and transformation. The generic topics include argumentation and academic writing, the process of research, research paradigms, ethics in research, as well as qualitative and quantitative research methods, data analyses and reporting. This is complemented by the generic module on education theory and how to use it in research and practice. In order to particularly focus on the aim of the programme to capacitate students to bring about transformation and change and also instil reflexive practices, we focus on two empowering approaches namely action research (AR) and appreciative enquiry (AI).

Creswell (2008, p. 604) explains AR as a “spiral of looking, thinking and action”. It allows researchers to scrutinise and appraise their work (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) and is thus a suitable approach to allow the PGDip students to work towards solving specific problems in their own contexts though policy processes (Creswell, 2008). AR places students at the heart of the enquiry (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) and thus enable them to identify and address challenges. The AR cycle involves a cycle of *observing, planning, implementing and reflecting* (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). AR can be used effectively to improve one’s own work context, and as such bring hope (cf. LeeFon, 2013 amongst others).

AI, in addition, is an opportunity centred approach that initially consisted of 4 stages, namely *Discover, Dream, Design* and *Destiny*, with *Define* being added recently upfront. Boyd and Bright (2007, p. 1020) indicate that it is a research approach that “aims to create a change through a focus on elevating strengths and extending communities”. *Define* stage identifies the focus. *Discover* stage focuses on the best of what exists: that is the strengths of the organisation. During the *Dream* stage, participants are requested to imagine their organisation at its best, responding to the question “What might be?”, *Design* stage entails the group to develop concrete proposals for change “How can it be?” and *Destiny* (also called delivery) that allows for empowerment, improvisation and learning “What will be?” (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Bushe, 2013).

We selected these two transformative approaches in addition to generic qualitative and quantitative designs, because we believe that they would equip students to bring about change in their workplace. The research module is offered in the first semester of the two-year programme. While their research capabilities are finally appraised in a capstone project in the second year, students have to draw throughout the coursework from these research knowledges and skills during assessment activities, some of which I will point out.

Juxtaposing the three cycles (PP, AR, and AI), their compatibility becomes clear. The *agenda setting* phase in the PP resonates with the *observing* phase of AR and the *Define* phase of AI. During this phase the issue that needs to be addressed must be clarified and communicated. Policy formulation and policy adoption links with the *planning* part, and can be done through a process of AI (*Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny*). This will allow for policy development and adoption in the light of the strength of the organisation, and imagining what can be. Policy implementation links with implementation during AR, while policy evaluation and

review reverberate with *reflecting* in AR. Combining AR and AI with the PP, creates the opportunities to respond to challenges and needs in a positive and constructive manner. However, many of the skills required for such research is embedded in the coursework modules and the assessment, of which I provide some examples.

Research capacity building through assessment tasks

To be successful in postgraduate research, students must be able to do a thorough and coherent literature review. This will be expected of students, in most of the coursework modules, as illustrated by the following example from the *Education systems* module:

Drawing from multiple sources of knowledge, and using the six societal factors that influence education systems as a framework for analysis, explore and deliberate on the nature of the SA Education system, including contemporary education issues² and concomitant vulnerable groups within this system.

Part of a policy researcher's work, is to present information in a way that informs the audience comprehensively, and thus logical communication of information is required. The following is an example of where students are required to do this in a group during the *legislative and policy framework for education in South Africa* module:

Illustrate by means of a comprehensive poster presentation the legislative and policy framework within which the South African Education system operates, showing the relevance and interrelatedness within the framework.

Policy researchers must not only be able to collect comprehensive information and communicate such information, they must also be able to provide a critical voice in the light of the information. This is for instance assessed in the module on *professional context: policy for transformed practice in education*, as follows:

As a class, compile a newspaper on contemporary education issues. Each student will be required to act as a journalist, and contribute various international and national perspectives on specific issues in a creative and rigorous manner. Critical editorial comment will be required.

We expect students as future policy makers to be informed about issues that role-players in the South African context are grappling with. This informs the *agenda setting* as part of the PP and resonates with *observing* in the AR cycle. They must be able to provide recommendations based on comprehensive information, as is evaluated in the following assessment task in the *foundations of education law and policy* module:

Based on the current legislative and policy framework, principles of law and policy, common law, case law and court judgements, suggest appropriate steps for stakeholders to deal with issues and complexities as presented in various newspaper articles.

² We will change the issues to be discussed every year, *inter alia* based on the issues that the students agree upon in class.

In line with AR and AI, policy researchers need to be able to appraise their own context. The following is an example of an assessment tasks that evaluate this ability in students individually in the module on *professional context: policy for transformed practice in education*:

Communicate your own professional context, and relate it to contemporary issues and vulnerable groups in your context.

Linked with the Dream phase of AI, the students will be given particular tasks where they need to reflect, plan and dream, as this example from the module on *policy and management processes for responsive transformation in education* shows:

Write an essay framed within your own professional context to critically consider the possibilities of policy to creatively address the identified contemporary issues in their own work environment.

and

Write a reflective and analytical essay in which the framework [on what democracy is] is utilised to assess their own professional contexts whilst also imagining the possibilities for piecemeal change.

And finally the capstone projects requires students to use the insights and skills that they gained in the programme to write a research essay using one or both of the transformative approaches discussed earlier:

Write a 6000-words research paper on the small-scale action research and/or appreciative inquiry project that you undertook in your own professional context, using a policy process towards addressing a particular issue to bring about piecemeal change.

Conclusion

The purpose of a PGDip in Education is “to prepare an educator for an advanced leadership position in that field” and as such the programme that was discussed in this paper aims to prepare students for advanced leadership positions in the field of Education Policy and Law (RSA, 2015, p. 42). Policymaking at the various levels in South Africa needs to address challenges that role-players face, based on research. We are convinced that by capacitating students to do research within the context of their work, towards bringing about change, this programme has the potential to contribute to piecemeal transformation in education. This programme will roll out at the start of 2016, and will be monitored to appraise the extent to which the intended outcome of the programme is reached.

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