

Ozgur Bolat's Development Work Transforming pedagogy through project- based learning in Turkey

In common with many developed countries Turkey has been seeking ways to reform its education system. The Ministry of Education has drawn support in this endeavour from the Turkish Education Foundation, an independent body which relies on funding from sponsors such as Vodafone. It was with the support of the Foundation that Ozgur Bolat was able to come to Cambridge as a research student. Ozgur was interested in distributed leadership and in particular teacher leadership which seemed to him to offer a way forward for national educational reform.

During his first year in Cambridge Ozgur came into contact with Hertfordshire schools when he was asked to assist in a project led by David Frost. Schools in Stevenage were working collaboratively to improve all students learning and had adopted tools and ideas from the Carpe Vitam LfL project (Frost *et al.*, 2008). They were seeking to make innovative practices visible to each other, so Ozgur was asked to visit schools and to interview teachers and students about initiatives such as 'Vertical Tutoring', 'Student Observation of Teaching' and 'Feedback on assignments through audio files'. The data would then be used to produce case studies that could be shared within the participating schools. This work provided a clear view of teachers leading change.

At the same time the Turkish Education Foundation had launched an initiative to contribute to the transformation of pedagogy in Turkish schools. The initiative carried with it a significant challenge to established pedagogical norms. It required teachers to adopt student-centred approaches in which students would exercise choice in the content of their learning and inquiry-based modes of learning. This cast the teacher in the role of a facilitator of learning rather than someone who parcels up and transmits knowledge. The chosen development strategy for the 'Project-Based Learning' initiative was to organise a summer school for a teacher from each of the 154 schools in the network of teacher training schools. These high schools play a role in preparing their students for teacher training

university programmes. The 2 week long training course featured seminars led by experts from the University of Marmara and the newly trained teacher leaders were sent back to their schools to train their colleagues in project based pedagogy. The University of Cambridge Faculty of Education was asked to work with Ozgur to evaluate the initiative over the course of an academic year (Opfer, Frost and Bolat, 2008). They designed questionnaires aimed to assess the impact of the summer school on the participants' pedagogical values and beliefs and gathered data along the way with follow up surveys (Opfer, Frost and Bolat, 2008). Towards the end of the academic year Darleen Opfer, David Frost and Ozgur Bolat visited a sample of schools in the region of Istanbul to examine at first hand the way the initiative had been implemented.

These visits were delightful occasions characterised by impeccable hospitality and warm welcomes both in the Principal's office and in classrooms. In each of the five schools visited the team interviewed the Principal, the teacher leader who had participated in the original summer school, a group of teachers who had been involved in the initiative and a group of students who took part in projects. Interviewees were asked to judge the level of penetration of the initiative and many said that it had been very successful and had been widely discussed throughout the school. It was said that the initiative had brought a new way of thinking about teaching and learning into the school. Consciousness about alternative pedagogy had certainly been raised.

The research team received presentations from students about their projects. Some projects were focused on social and environmental issues: for example, in one project the students had investigated air pollution and its impact on agriculture. They discovered that some plants absorb pollutants more than others. The herb parsley seemed to be the most vulnerable to pollution from nearby industry. In other projects students had focussed on strategies to support their own learning. For example, one group of students had devised fictional stories in which were embedded factual content they needed to be able to recall for their exams. One crucial variable in these projects was the extent to which the focus had been identified by the students themselves rather than by their teachers.

From the perspective of both teachers and students, the project-based approach had a range of benefits. For example, students developed confidence in their learning and a greater sense of responsibility.

They reported that they had been able to engage in deeper learning of aspects of the national curriculum through their projects and their performance in normal lessons and assignments had improved because of increased motivation and concentration. Through their projects they had learnt about team work and project management. Their social and communication skills had been enhanced and they experienced the thrill of determining the direction of their own learning. The support of school principals was paramount as was the sanction and support given by the Ministry of Education.

The initiative culminated in a ceremony in the capital city, Ankara, to celebrate the achievement and award prizes for the twelve best projects. This event, together with two broadcasts on national television, reflects the overall success of the initiative in raising the profile of pedagogic discourse. The project-based learning initiative involved approximately 2,000 students working on 450 projects with the support of a core of enthusiastic teachers in each of the 154 schools. It has clearly shown what can be done when teachers are provided with support to explore innovations in professional practice. Nevertheless, there are challenges to the long term impact of the initiative.

One of the encouraging findings of the initial survey was that most of the teachers participating in the summer school did not have entrenched beliefs antithetical to the goals of the initiative and many were already using teaching approaches that would support project-based learning. These approaches flourished as the project-based learning developed in the schools, but the question of sustainability arises because the project-based learning seems to have taken place in parallel with the normal national curriculum focussed lessons. In some cases students were allowed to take time out from their normal lessons to work on their projects, but in the main the projects were done in their free time. Some students reported that there was a tension between their need to prepare for their exams and their desire to make progress with their projects. This is not to say that principals and teachers do not want to see the approach flourish in the future, but it is not clear how the project-based approach can be integrated into the curriculum when the main driver is the final examination on which university entrance depends.

One of the challenges highlighted by the project-based learning initiative is the role of the teacher leaders in enabling the school to implement such initiatives. In survey responses some said that, in

the summer school, there was not enough time devoted to a consideration of the skills needed to steer change. During the case study visits the research team heard accounts from the teacher leaders about their approach. For example, one said of her colleagues that: *they do it so as not to break my heart* (Teacher leader interview, School 1). For her, the leadership role was about personal relationships, trust and loyalty. For others it was a matter of effective provision of the prescribed 10 hours of school-based seminars outlined at the summer school. At the time of writing, Ozgur Bolat is developing his plans for a further project which will build on the project-based learning initiative. He plans to invite some of the same schools in Istanbul to participate in a project to investigate how teachers can be supported in developing their professional roles to encompass the leadership of innovation and change. Through a national survey, he hopes to be able to map the dominant patterns in the way Turkish teachers see their professionalism and then engage in practical experimentation in a small number of schools to see what enables teacher leadership to flourish.

References

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