17 The BA Project as an Example of Large Scale Educational Change

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter has three main parts. Firstly in section two we consider the extent to which we can see evidence of the educational change principles introduced in Chapter 2 being present or absent in the planning and implementation of the BA Project. We do this largely by drawing on information provided in the other chapters of the book. As in Chapter 2, while we separate principles for ease of writing, it will be obvious that they are in reality interdependent and mutually influencing. In section three we provide a summary of some of the tangible ways in which the Project has contributed to the implementation of the Basic Education Reform in Oman, both in terms of the teaching of English and more widely. Finally in section four we highlight some features of the Project planning and implementation that we feel were particularly important in enabling its overall success.

2 THE BA PROJECT AS AN EXAMPLE OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

In this section we discuss the BA Project in the light of the ideas about educational change introduced in Chapter 2. To what extent can we see any of these ideas 'in action' in the planning and/or implementation of the BA Project? Can we see any evidence of ways in which their absence or presence affected the Project process? We discuss them in the order they are introduced in chapter two.

2.1 Educational change planning and implementation requires active effort over time

The BA Project was part of a wider reform process that began to be planned in the mid 1990s and whose implementation throughout all subjects within the school system continues to the present. The setting is thus one in which educational change

is viewed as an ongoing 'national' commitment. This understanding assisted by the existing stable political framework in Oman, the ability to commit to adequate financial resources over time, and consistent support from key Omanis in the Ministry of Education, probably contributed to the initial conception of the BA Project as a long-term initiative. The Project lasted from 1999-2008. Academic, administrative and leadership staff in Oman and Leeds were therefore potentially participants for up to a decade. Individual students were part of the Project for at least three years.

What then were some effects of the Project being conceived of as a long-term process from its inception? Firstly, while the initial contract for the provision of a BA Programme with certain characteristics remained the guiding document over time, there was time for ongoing modification of the Programme content and structure in the light of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation, to better reflect the needs of the students and their context (see Chapters 3, 11 and 12). Such modifications in the light of experience are likely to be necessary in any large-scale educational change process, but often do not take place due to short term commitment to funding and active leadership.

Secondly several chapters in this also book suggest that over time initial misunderstandings and administrative problems were substantially reduced or eliminated due to the increasingly high profile and familiarity of the Project among the educational community in Oman and the growth in trust and goodwill between those involved in implementation that resulted (see in particular Chapter 11). Again in any change process, especially one involving participants from different cultural contexts, such familiarity and acceptance takes time to develop.

The fact that the generous Project timescale enabled both of the above to occur, suggests that 'time' was an important factor in building the capacity and contextual sensitivity of the academic and administrative participants and in raising awareness of Project aims among others less directly affected. These changes in turn enhanced the Programme's ability to support the students' capacity building and so contributed to making the Project a success.

2.2 Implementation of educational change will never take place in a uniform manner.

The BA Project was a national initiative. It aimed to support the wider national Basic Education Reform process. Students were however different both in terms of the individual attitudes and skills that they brought to the BA Programme and in terms of contextual conditions existing within their region. Thus, while all students within a given cohort followed the same programme, their response to their study experience, especially perhaps in terms of its more or less visible effects on their classroom behaviours, was likely to vary widely.

The Programme seems to have been more or less consciously structured with this realisation in mind. Dividing students into regional groups working with a Regional Tutor (RT) throughout their studies provided a means for the practical classroom implications of Programme inputs to be mediated in the light of local realities. A positive, trusting group dynamic within each RT-student group was

necessary if such mediation was to be effective. In most regions, for most student cohorts, RTs were able to develop such a dynamic. They deserve recognition and respect for the professionalism and skill with which they succeeded in juggling the requirements of 'implementational flexibility' in response to differing regional classroom realities, and the need for 'academic parity' across all regions (see Chapter 6 for details of some of the tensions that could arise).

2.3   Large scale educational change affects the whole of the existing education system

The BA Project was part of a much wider change process. The exact planning and implementation of the Basic Education Project as a whole is beyond the remit of this book. However, if there had been no consideration of the wider educational environment and the people affected (other than English teachers), the Project could not have succeeded.

BA students were working in a broadly supportive professional context. Classroom teaching materials (English for Me) that matched the educational principles espoused by the BA Project had already been prepared and were in use in increasing numbers of primary schools from the start of the Programme. Changes to school assessment methods and formats to assess the desired outcomes of the materials were already underway. Extracts from the materials could be widely used as the basis for teaching inputs and practice opportunities. The principles and practices introduced in the BA Programme's language assessment module could be seen to be relevant to assessment practices expected in schools. For later cohorts especially, both of these supported the content and process of the BA Project, and contributed to demonstrating its practical relevance and validity for those working in Basic Education in Oman.

2.4   Educational change needs informed, consistent leadership

In 2.1 above we have commented on the importance of the consistency of national policymaking and leadership throughout the Project lifetime. Actual leadership of the BA Project itself was shared between Oman and Leeds. The Ministry's EMC and Steering Committees together with the Project Manager and his staff provided continuity and leadership in Oman (see Chapters 1 and 11). In addition a number of key Omani Ministry staff who had been involved in the initial Project planning played important support roles behind the scenes particularly during the first half of the project period. In Leeds there was stability and continuity among the core project staff, who rotated the formal Academic Coordinator role throughout the Project lifetime. Finally, the RTs, who were the Project representatives in Oman with whom the students had most frequent contact, also ensured a stable element of leadership regionally, with the great majority of students working with a single RT throughout their period of study (see Chapter 6).

Almost all staff involved with both the day-to-day running of the Project and its more macro-level management and leadership thus worked on the Project for far longer than is normally the case. While the long-term nature of the Project made continuity a possibility, the fact that such continuity existed suggests that, for the

non-Omani participants especially, the Project, as it developed over time, represented a context in which the 'gains' (e.g. meaningful work, a degree of personal autonomy) outweighed the 'losses' (e.g. modest pay, sometimes remote location).

Such continuity among those filling key leadership and management roles was a very positive feature of the Project. It enabled Leeds staff to develop the deeper understandings of the Omani school and cultural contexts that helped to make Programme and module design increasingly finely tuned to student needs (see Chapter 3). For the staff managing the Project in Oman, the initially overwhelming complexity of Project management was, with important help from senior Omani initiators, over time systematised. As the Project became better established, more widely known and appreciated (see 2.5 below) and as the Ministry's confidence in the leadership of the Project Management team grew, it became easier for them to deal with issues and problems as they arose, without the need to refer to higher authority. The continuity among RTs enabled the many who stayed for more than one three year contract to develop a deeper understanding of the aims of the BA Project, the students' academic abilities and difficulties and Omani classroom realities. They thus became better able both to support their students, and to contribute to adjustments in the Programme design (see Chapters 3, 6 and 11).

All of the above contributed in more or less direct ways to the improvement of different aspects of the content and/or structure of the BA Project. In so doing they also supported the professional and personal value of the study experience for the students, which in turn hopefully has led and will lead to positive effects on learners, which will ultimately benefit Omani society more generally.

2.5 Communicating about and raising awareness of educational change

This aspect of change planning and implementation is again largely beyond the remit of this book, since it refers to the wider national change process. However, communication and awareness-raising in this long term Project had certain interesting features which we will briefly consider here.

Leeds staff were responsible for planning the 'content' and structure of the Programme and for leading the implementation of such plans. However, as seen above (see Chapter 3) their awareness of 'how much' change the Project represented for students inevitably developed over time, through their own experience of working on the Project and through feedback from students, RTs, and Oman-based Project leaders. This suggests that awareness of what change means in practice and of what this implies for how it may best be supported is just as much a developing process for the change planners and providers as for those (teachers) who are expected to implement it in classrooms.

Within Oman the process of developing awareness /understanding of the Project and its contribution to the wider educational changes also took time. BA students came from across Oman. The structure of the Programme was such that while they remained teachers in their schools throughout their studies, they also needed a degree of release from their duties to be able to participate fully. The heads

of the schools in which students worked could be more or less helpful in this respect. In most cases satisfactory arrangements were made, but a noticeable minority of students in the initial years found headteachers reluctant to grant them sufficient free time, which would have disadvantaged them during their course of study (see Chapter 15).

The procedure followed in Oman for communicating about / raising awareness of the purpose of the Project was that normally used within the existing top-down educational structure. Senior Omani managers and the Project Manager regularly visited and negotiated with the regional education authorities to try and ensure that students were granted adequate release to participate in the Programme fully. The regional educational administrators in turn negotiated with headteachers individually. Over time these formal efforts (together with a more general understanding of the Basic Education Reform of which the Project was a part) undoubtedly helped to raise the Project profile and so understanding of its purposes at individual school level.

In parallel to these formal top-down awareness-raising activities, more informal bottom-up initiatives were also emerging from within the Project itself. As cohort followed cohort, graduates from earlier cohorts were available to provide information and advice for their colleagues in later cohorts and for headteachers, about what participation in the Programme entailed and what degree of adjustment to established working patterns was needed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these informal contributions were often highly influential, given the nature of Omani society and the tendency to share experience orally in social gatherings. Similarly the termly visits to schools by RTs helped them to become known entities within regions and schools and gave them the opportunity to provide information about the Project directly to participants' headteachers.

Awareness-raising in both Leeds and Oman was thus a process. In both cases it entailed both formal meetings and documentation in the earlier stages of the Project as well as informal information-giving and feedback from Project staff and participants within each region once the initiative was underway. The latter arguably played as important a role as the former in enabling the Project to be understood at school level. Evidence of the important role played in communicating change through interaction at local level between 'more experienced' change participants, and others directly and indirectly affected, is rare in the literature. This may again be because so few projects are ever conceived with the time scale needed for early 'generations' of participants to share their understandings with those that follow them.

2.6   Developing the capacity of those affected by educational change.

The BA Project was a capacity-building exercise for English teachers. Its desired outcome was a cadre of Omani language teachers able to teach to the specifications of the new Basic Education curriculum, and to contribute more widely to the national reform process at school and/or (in some cases) at regional or national level.

In Chapter 2 we introduced certain features which are commonly thought to be typical of effective capacity-building provision. We need to bear in mind that these

features derive mostly from English-speaking contexts, and that in certain cultures with more hierarchical education systems, teachers may respond more positively to top-down directives. In addition the academic nature and assessment needs of a BA Programme added a second strand of capacity-building (academic skills in English) to the purely professional development at the heart of the Project. This was also a three-year Programme rather than the more typical, shorter, in-service 'change training' Programmes that the features in Chapter 2 conventionally refer to. Nonetheless the students were practitioners, being trained to implement change in their schools, and it is therefore worth considering the degree to which the Project was designed in a way that helped develop their capacity to do so. We look at the points raised in Chapter 2 one by one.

2.6.1 Starting by helping students to articulate their current practices and principles and comparing these to those underlying the change.

Given the formal nature of the BA Programme, and the setting in which it took place, this was not how it began. However, as the Programme developed, later cohorts certainly had opportunities to discuss Programme inputs in relation to their existing ideas and their knowledge of their own classroom context during seminar sessions at Winter and Summer schools, and during Day Release with RTs. In addition the emphasis on 'criticality' in the assessment criteria provided opportunities for such articulation. This was again especially true for later cohorts of students as a result of the ongoing Programme modifications referred to in section 2.1 above (see Chapter 3).

2.6.2 Provide an appropriate balance between theory and practice

As an academic course, the BA did involve lectures covering theories and principles underpinning ideas about, for example, language acquisition and the nature of discourse. However, a large proportion of the course (see Chapter 3) was made up of 'methodology' modules in which students were constantly encouraged to consider what such theory implied for their practice as teachers, in terms of classroom techniques, materials and assessment. In addition, as previously mentioned, students were all practising teachers who spent much of the year in their classrooms. They consequently had many opportunities to test in their own classrooms the 'real life' usefulness of ideas and techniques that had been introduced during the formal teaching sessions, and to adapt them over time as necessary for their own contexts.

2.6.3 Ensure that some time is spent in students' own working environments and encourage collaboration

We believe that this was a real area of strength in the BA Project. Students spent most of their working week in school during term time. Once a week they met their RTs and other members of their regional cohort in groups typically of 10-15 students for a Day Release session. These sessions were designed both to provide academic

support for module sessions that had previously been studied and for related assignment writing, and to provide a forum for discussion of practical implementation issues (see Chapter 6). Although students undoubtedly sometimes found it difficult to marry their professional responsibilities as practising teachers with the academic expectations of the BA Programme, the weekly meeting was an opportunity to share issues, problems and solutions arising from academic work and/or attempts to implement changes in classroom practice with colleagues in similar situations, facilitated by an 'expert' RT. Over the three years of the Programme, the opportunities for collaboration and professional learning provided by these Day Release sessions constituted arguably the most significant source of professional and personal support for participants (Freeman, 2007).

2.6.4 Recognise that developing confidence in new practices takes time

All students on the BA Project had to contend with at least two sets of new understandings and practices. Firstly there was the need to learn how to use spoken and written English for the 'real purpose' of studying in English, and to understand and practise the study conventions associated with UK university learning. Secondly there were new professional understandings and practices that had to be developed, through studying in English.

Here again the extended structure of the Programme represented strength. It enabled time to be given early in the Programme to the development of academic language skills and for students to have multiple opportunities, staged throughout each year, to pass through a version of the (a) to (e) understanding and practise sequence (see section 2.6 in Chapter 2) as they read and wrote for study purposes (see Chapter 7) As noted above students had similarly frequent chances to practise and comment on the appropriacy of new practices, when working in their parallel professional personas as teachers.

The high proportion of all students obtaining BA degrees suggests that most students did have sufficient time to develop a solid level of confidence and competence in the new ideas that had been introduced. However, as in any change context, the degree of transfer of apparent understanding of ideas into behaviour that reflects such understanding in practice varies considerably from one individual to the next and is rarely immediately or consistently visible.

There was positive feedback from a number of headteachers on students' professional development (see Chapter 15), and a large number of graduates now occupy positions as Senior English Teachers (SETs) and/or Regional Supervisors of English (see section 3 of this chapter below). In addition reports over time from those with first hand experience of students' classroom behaviour, the RTs, suggest that a substantial number of students did make noticeable changes to their practices during the BA. More importantly there is evidence that many students themselves expressed the feeling that they had changed as teachers (see Chapters 5 and 8). Personal and professional change is, however, a complex and ongoing individual process. It will thus inevitably take time for implementation of the major system-

wide changes to classroom practice envisaged by the Basic Education Reform to become an unquestioned feature of classroom life in every graduate's school.

2.6.5 Provide repeated opportunities to try out new practices.

As mentioned in 2.6.2 to 2.6.4 the structure of the BA Programme certainly did provide this, over an extended period.

2.6.6 Extended support once the formal training is over

While the Programme provided extensive support for the three years of its duration, for a number of contextually relevant reasons no formal mechanisms were established specifically to enable BA graduates to continue to support each other once the Programme ended. The establishment of a BA e-mail discussion forum was considered but was not followed up for two main reasons. Firstly, it is only recently that most graduates have had reliable e-mail access, and secondly, within the Omani cultural context, e-mail communication between male and female graduates would not be appropriate.

The development of ongoing Project-specific professional development meetings or workshops was not feasible since there was rarely a critical mass of BA graduates in one school or group of neighbouring schools. It was also not considered desirable post-BA to set up further professional development initiatives only for Leeds graduates. Instead BA graduates now have access to and participate in the ongoing professional development provided for all Omani graduate teachers, through locally organised workshops and annual teachers' and supervisors' conferences at regional and national level.

In contrast to reports in the literature arguing the need for ongoing support for teachers who have completed a (usually quite short) formal training course, a feature of this Project is the extent to which BA graduates provided and continue to provide formal or informal support to others. More formally, many graduates have taken on support roles as SETs within their schools or as Regional Supervisors of English, which for some entails running workshops in their schools for their own teachers, or for teachers from a local cluster of schools. Informally, throughout the project lifetime, earlier graduates supported new BA students working in their schools – sometimes helping them directly with their coursework perhaps, but more often just giving advice on time management, ways of adapting course ideas to school work, and generally moulding their expectations about the course. One might say that through such informal support a BA community of practice (Wenger, 1998) was built up, whereby students learned to 'be a BA-student' from their peers (in their regional groups) and near-peers (school colleagues who had already graduated).

In the following section we look at some of the tangible results that have emerged from the Project.

3   SOME TANGIBLE 'RESULTS' OF THE BA PROJECT

There are numerous results of the project that might be commented on. However, for reasons of space, we present a summary below as bullet points only. Evidence for what follows comes from reports by the Project Manager in Oman, RT reports, and other Ministry documents.

3.1   Numerical outcomes of the Project.

- More than 800 teachers have graduated with degrees, the vast majority with Honours.
- 58 Omanis have studied for MAs at Leeds through the Project, the majority being BA Leeds graduates. In addition 5 are studying for or have completed PhDs.

3.2   Project contribution to personal changes in graduates.

Graduates from the BA programme are considered by participants, RTs, the Project Manager, Leeds staff, and Ministry officials to have changed in terms of their
- Academic knowledge
- Improved proficiency in English
- IT skills
- Autonomy
- Time-management skills
- Critical thinking skills

3.3   Project contribution to professional changes in graduates

Participants, RTs, the Project Manager, Leeds staff, and Ministry officials have noted changes in graduates' professional personas in terms of their
- Increased professional confidence
- Greater motivation towards, and deeper commitment to, the teaching profession
- Greater autonomy as teachers.
- Ability to employ a range of effective teaching skills.

3.4   Project contribution to capacity-building in schools and in the Regions

- Over 230 graduates (2009 figures) hold positions as SETs. Many others have already moved on from SET to other positions, so the number of graduates who have had experience as SETs is probably considerably higher than this.
- Other graduates have taken up positions of responsibility as Regional Supervisors of English and Regional Teacher Trainers.
- In their new roles many graduates are carrying out professional development workshops for other teachers and mentor new teachers.
- Many of the personal and professional beliefs and attitudes of those who have been appointed in a supervisory /professional-development-providing capacity are likely to be considerably different from their predecessors. Their appointment is therefore likely to contribute to the

gradual development of a less 'evaluative' focus among those whose role it is to 'supervise' others. This is one way in which the graduates are undoubtedly contributing to the implementation of the wider reform process.

3.5   Project impact on pupils' learning

- There is relatively little conclusive evidence as to the real impact of the Project on pupils' learning (Freeman, 2007). Although there is some evidence of higher levels of achievement and of changes in pupils' learning experiences, it is difficult to be sure this is only because of the BA.

3.6   Project support for the wider reform process.

Most BA graduates might be regarded as 'vanguard teachers' (Goodson, 2003). Within the wider reform context, evidence in previous chapters suggests that most graduates are teachers who are committed to their profession and whose personal and professional skills have developed in ways that are likely to be supportive of the reform process. The BA has contributed to this through

- Supporting graduates through the process of developing their understanding of the principles, rationale and methods underlying the Basic Education Curriculum.
- Supporting graduates in making links between such understandings and contextually appropriate classroom practices.
- Developing graduates' confidence and competence to an extent that makes them more likely to be open to, and able to respond effectively to, any future educational change initiatives.

3.7   Project support for the development of a research culture among teachers

- The classroom focus of BA dissertations, among later Project cohorts especially, has dramatically raised the profile of practitioner research in Oman. By 2009, the Ministry was keen to develop a similar teacher research culture in other subject areas.
- Numerous BA / MA research studies that have already been published in English by the Ministry as part of the BA Project (e.g. Borg, 2006) are now being translated into Arabic for wider dissemination.

4   CONCLUSION

No educational change project can be perfect, and given the innate complexity of any such process it is very difficult to draw categorical conclusions about the extent of its success. However, judged against the list of principles in Chapter 2, the planning and implementation of the BA Project over time can, we believe, be considered to have been largely successful. The principal aim of the Project was to establish a cadre of graduate Omani English teachers who would be able to participate fully in the implementation of the Basic Education Reforms in schools.

The numerous more or less direct outcomes of the Project provided in Section 3 above, suggest that many aspects of these aims have been met. Furthermore, RTs (Chapters 3 and 11), a large majority of sampled graduates (Chapters 5, 8, 9 and 13), a large majority of sampled headteachers (Chapter 15), and the 4th External Evaluator (Freeman, 2007) all suggest that the Project enhanced graduates' personal and professional development in terms of both their generic and subject specific skills.

Some factors related to the planning and implementation of the BA Project that seem to have been particularly influential in contributing to its success are:

- The extended term of the Project. Advantages arising from the length of the Project timeframe have been mentioned in many of the previous sections. Perhaps the greatest advantage was the opportunity it provided for all project stakeholders to develop a fuller understanding of what the Basic Education Reform implied, and so how the Programme content and structure could be adjusted to better match students' needs. Sadly few project sponsors are willing to commit themselves to such a realistic change time scale.
- Consistent support and funding at national level, which made it practically possible to act on feedback and evaluation to improve Project procedures and /or Programme content and structure.
- The fact that the aims of the Project were more rather than less consistent with the aims of the national Basic Education Reform that was actually taking place in students' schools. This provided a set of national educational aims to which those planning and adjusting Project aims and Programme content/structure could refer, and also helped to make participation relevant and meaningful to the students.
- The continuity in Project leadership throughout the Project lifetime and the consequent opportunity and willingness to carry out the continuous 'fine tuning' of the Project process and the Programme content and structure.
- The initial planning of the BA Programme structure to provide a balance between academic input and real classroom life, supported throughout by access to colleagues and a more expert tutor/facilitator.

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