Constructing a Dialogical Space for the Professional Learning of Israeli Teachers of Writing

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Abstract: There has been a resurgence in interest in professional learning programs that offer L1 literacy teachers an opportunity and a guided community in which to write and share their writing (Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Locke, Whitehead & Dix, 2013). The rationale for these programs frequently emphasises the value of teachers themselves experiencing and reflecting on writing in collaborative and respectful professional communities. There is some evidence to suggest that these experiences enable L1 educators to better appreciate the pleasures, challenges and learning that their own students may experience in the social writing spaces in classrooms (Yagelski, 2012). Other studies look beyond the honing of writing pedagogy in PD programs as such and investigate the identity work (Gee, 2000) that is possible through educators writing dialogically together and reflecting on their sense of themselves as writers, educators and learners (van de Ven & Doecke, 2011).

In this paper, I report on a practitioner inquiry study in Israel, in which cohorts of L1 educators from different primary schools, representing diverse cultural groups, met regularly to write and collaboratively reflect on their writing pedagogy. The study critically and reflexively focuses on the writing and dialogue generated within this course recognized by the Israeli Ministry of Education. The 30 hour program has been designed and regularly modified to sit within the boundaries of Israeli policy guidelines, but also to encourage participating teachers to reflect upon and challenge some national policies through their writing. Data, in the form of teachers' written reflections, letters, and narratives, has been collected over the seven years of the program.

Drawing on this data, interviews and my own research journal, I explore the potential of a government supported PD program to meet the particular needs of the participants in their unique settings and still satisfy standardised requirements of these teachers as articulated in government policy. While encouraging these teachers to explore and understand their practice, I have confronted my own assumptions about writing, writing pedagogy and professional learning. Assuming the role of leader in these programs has significantly enhanced my own professional learning as both a teacher and teacher-educator.

Keywords: professional learning; teacher writing; dialogic learning, writing pedagogy; practitioner inquiry

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves (Rich, 1972, p. 18).

Introduction

Across the world, policy makers, researchers and educators alike agree that professional learning¹ for teachers is a crucial part in teachers’ work (e.g. Colbert et al., 2008;
Correnti, 2007; Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Desimone, 2009; Doecke et al., 2008; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010) and these days it is rarely absent from newly developed policy documents. Actually, professional learning for teachers has regularly been a "hot" issue in debates concerning education; since before the turn of the century, researchers and practitioners have tended to agree with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) that teachers who own a larger personal knowledge base teach more effectively. This explains the centrality of professional learning programs in reform agendas in diverse national contexts: the U.S.A (see US Congress 2001; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, (2001); Australia (see AITSL, 2013); Romania (Richter et al. 2011) and Israel (Ministry of Education, 2008).

Despite strong agreement on the importance of professional learning in teachers’ work, there is little agreement in defining these terms (Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004), and any consensus appears to be limited to the importance of teachers continuing to learn throughout their careers. Opinions differ, especially, when discussing the expected goals or outcomes of teacher professional learning. Increasingly, policy makers and many researchers, too, pinpoint one goal as enabling teachers to achieve certain standards, usually related to improving student learning and perhaps wellbeing (e.g. Guskey, 2000). Some researchers promote a far broader aim for PD, though: valuing teacher learning and enrichment of teacher professional identity as well as the sense of identity of students (e.g. Clark, 2001).

Opinions also differ on the forms of professional learning recommended for educators. As I have written elsewhere (Aharonian, 2008a, 2008b, 2009), since the 1990s, there have periodically been calls for educators to engage in personal and/or professional writing in association with professional learning activities. There has been a resurgence in interest in professional learning programs that offer L1 literacy teachers an opportunity and a guided community in which to write and share their writing (e.g. Cremin & Myhill, 2012; Locke, Whitehead & Dix, 2013). The rationale for these programs frequently emphasises the value of teachers themselves experiencing and reflecting on writing in collaborative and mutually respectful professional communities.
There is some evidence to suggest that these experiences enable L1 educators to better appreciate the pleasures, challenges and learning that their own students may experience in the social writing spaces in classrooms (Yagelski, 2012). Other studies look beyond the honing of writing pedagogy in PD programs as such and investigate the identity work that is possible through educators writing dialogically together and reflecting on their sense of themselves as writers, educators and learners (van de Ven & Doecke, 2011).

Research into teacher writing in the context of teacher learning identifies four different purposes for it:

a. It can improve individual teachers’ pedagogy, in general, and improve the teaching of writing in the classroom, in particular

b. It can enhance the practice of individual educators through the identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165) involved in the process

c. It can help in the generation of a professional community of educators

d. It can empower teachers and heighten the status of the teaching profession through advocacy work. In this case, teachers can be writing for other professionals within the teaching community or for readers well beyond it.

In this paper, I report on an Israeli practitioner inquiry, which considers all four of these purposes for a professional writing program. The particular program designed and led by me, involved 16 cohorts of L1 educators from different primary schools in Israel, representing diverse cultural groups. They met regularly in state sanctioned professional learning courses to write and collaboratively reflect on their writing pedagogy. The study critically and reflexively focuses on the writing and dialogue generated within these courses. The 30 hour program was designed and regularly modified to sit within the boundaries of Israeli policy guidelines, but also to encourage participating teachers to reflect upon and challenge some national policies through their writing. Data, in the form of teachers’ written reflections, letters, and narratives, has been collected over the seven years of the program. Drawing on this data, interviews and my own research journal, I explore the potential of a government supported PD program to meet the particular needs
of the participants in their unique settings and still satisfy standardised requirements of these teachers as articulated in government policy. While examining how these teachers understand their practice, I have confronted my own assumptions about writing, writing pedagogy and professional learning.

This paper is an account of the kind of professional learning I have offered for Israeli literacy teachers in the past 7 years. I begin by discussing the meaning of dialogic professional learning as I understand it. Next, using Bakhtinian theory, I explore the dialogical nature of the kind of professional learning that I have initiated. Finally, I discuss the challenge of continual negotiation required of me as a leader of professional learning, interested in providing dialogical kinds of learning for teachers in Israel while fulfilling the guidelines imposed on me by the “Ofek-Chadash” reform policy.

**Professional learning for Israeli L1 literacy teachers in the era of the “Ofek-Chadash” reform policy**

Since 2008, the professional learning of Israeli primary school and junior high school teachers has been mandated under the “Ofek-Chadash” reform (Ministry of Education, 2008). The national reform, intended to improve the quality of education in primary and junior high schools, included four main, complementary targets: (1) boosting the status of teachers and raising their salaries; (2) providing equal opportunities for all students and raising student achievement levels; (3) improving the ‘aklim chevrati’ (‘social climate’) of schools, and (4) empowering and expanding the authority of the school principal (Ministry of Education, 2008). The reform defined various pedagogical and administrative issues, among them the professional learning of educators. This was the first time that a systematic national policy for the professional learning of Israeli educators was established (Avidav-Unger, Rosner, & Rosenberg, 2013). Today, most Israeli primary teachers are choosing to attend those professional learning activities that contribute ‘clock hours’ to the 60 hour requirement for salary and professional advancement.
Since 2008, I have led a 30 hour in-service professional learning course for primary teachers in eight cities in northern Israel. The course, titled 'Literacy studies: Writing for the development of learning and thinking', is funded and authorized by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Approximately 400 primary school teachers have already completed the course. Teachers from different schools meet in regional teachers' centres to learn about the teaching of writing. My design of the courses is informed by my critical reading of a huge range of research literature that explores narrative, professional learning for educators, and writing pedagogy. The courses are firmly planted in the context of the “Ofek-Chadash” reform and its professional learning guidelines.

As one of the aims of the course is to enable teachers to understand the varied needs of their pupils as writers, I provide numerous opportunities for the teachers to write and discuss the writing process in their different classrooms. It is important, in my mind, for teachers who are competent writers to hear about the struggle of those teachers who are not used to writing, those who have had unpleasant experiences writing in the past and those who continue to suffer from a sense of insecurity when asked to write. During the courses, teachers write narratives connected to the teaching of writing in their own classrooms. They ‘publish’ their stories online and discuss them with peers. After receiving informal peer feedback, each teacher is required to formally revise his or her own text. I have designed the course in such a way that teacher writing is closely intertwined with the pedagogy of improving the teaching of writing. There is strong support in the literature for my belief that when they themselves experience the writing process, teachers have the opportunity to explore writing and the problems encountered by their pupils such as writer's block, sense of insecurity, and difficulty choosing a topic (e.g. Atwell 1987; Frank, Carpenter, & Smith, 2003). Members of the group explore classroom practice and share teacher knowledge through the reading of those narratives written by the teachers. Conversation is a platform for the shared processes which enable participants to generate meaning for mutual benefit (Clark 2001).

As a leader of professional learning in literacy in these courses, I am acutely aware that national and international testing focuses on a narrow understanding of literacy and
concentrates on particular skills. In harmony with the “Ofek-Chadash” reform aims, I am indeed interested in the improvement of achievement on those test scores while nonetheless aiming to enrich the written expression of Israeli pupils in a far broader sense. As a bridge between the course and the standards-based curriculum enacted in schools, I bring test items from the national Meitzav examinations² for the teachers themselves to undertake. In this sense we are engaging in an activity important to course goals as I have framed them but also allowing teachers to further explore standards based tasks at the same time. In this way, the dialogue in the course is constantly shifting between conceptualizing writing in the narrow school standards sense, and envisioning writing and its significant role in the lives of the teachers and their pupils.

I see myself as working towards creating a space for dialogue between teachers, a space in which personal and professional reflection and teacher growth are not simply a means to another end but an end in itself. Student achievement is central but not the only aim of the professional learning I am offering educators.

Another of my main aims in these courses is to introduce educators to the benefits of writing as a mode of professional learning (Beattie 1997; Doecke 2004; Elbaz 2002; Lieberman 2000; Shteiman, Gidron, Eilon, and Katz 2010) and professional peer-conversation as a means of reflection and growth (Calnin 2006; Danielson 2009; Day 1999). In several sessions, I model strategies of teacher collaboration (in the evaluation of student texts for example), encouraging teachers to adopt these shared practices at school. In course sessions the teachers work individually and in small groups to create professional texts, and critically evaluate products of other groups.

This inquiry focuses on the nature of the original understandings which are generated in the midst of these rich conversations in this collaborative process. It is interesting to be involved in a process in which many teachers see themselves as writers and producers of valid educational knowledge for the first time. Many are surprised to discover that their

² See Beller (2013)
work interests others. I am exploring these understandings and experiences and contemplating how they might influence the professional learning of these educators.

**Methodology**

In this practitioner inquiry, I explore my own professional context as a site of professional learning for my teacher-students. Adopting interpretive and constructivist approaches to qualitative research, I am working within a narrative paradigm. Qualitative research is often spoken about as subjective in nature (Flick, 2009; Stake, 2010), and it is no doubt true that writing in first person, my personal involvement is presented explicitly. In this respect, I present a view of professional knowledge as continually unfolding (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), a dynamic entity, socially constructed (Mishler, 1990), ever changing and never finite.

The type of inquiry I am presenting here does not hold generalization as a central aim (Williams, 2004); rather it zooms in and explores the specific and the situated nature of teachers’ professional learning practices. Rather than attempt to design a universal picture of how teachers should conceptualize their learning, this study is more interested in critically understanding the dialogic nature of the learning of cohorts of Israeli educators in a particular context.

Within this interpretive narrative paradigm, it is not relevant to search for some elusive objective truth in the data; the stories and other written texts collected. Carter (1993) reminds us that ‘Stories, including those told by teachers, are constructions that give a meaning to events and convey a particular sense of experience’ (p. 8). They are not the events themselves. Working with what Bruner (1986) calls a narrative ‘mode of thought’, I present and investigate the learning of Orna[^3], and her fellow teachers, as they were exploring their professional identities and worlds through writing teaching stories and reflecting on those stories.

[^3]: Orna, Veronica, Aya, and Ita are pseudonyms.
**Practitioner inquiry.**

Practitioner inquiry is not a new concept – Stenhouse (1975) was already advocating for it in the mid 1970s – and it has become increasingly popular in school settings due to its context specific nature and its immediate relevance. Published reports on practitioner research by educators and teacher educators working in in-service settings are becoming more common (e.g. Parr 2010, 2012; Vetter, 2012). According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), practitioner inquiry of this kind stands in contrast with the usual hierarchy of knowledge which considers academic knowledge as superior to local knowledge. An epistemological belief behind this inquiry is that educators who are significantly involved in their practice are knowledgeable about their work and are capable of critically evaluating educational knowledge and producing original understandings which can enhance their teaching and be of benefit to students (Cochran and Lytle, 2009).

**Narrative inquiry.**

The use of narrative inquiry in educational research has widely increased in the past two decades (e.g. Kamler, 2003; Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002; Shank, 2006). According to Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2008), narrative enables researchers to become sensitive to the multitude of meanings represented in qualitative data and to explore them together in search of new and significant understandings. In this process we inquire into “how stories are structured and the ways in which they work… who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted” (pp. 1-2).

When researchers use the term ‘narrative inquiry’ they are generally signalling that they employ an interpretive approach to all stages of their research (Josselson, 2006). They acknowledge that in our everyday lives, narratives are a means through which we interpret our world (Gudmundsdottir, 1995). Doecke and Parr (2009) describe the centrality of narrative in the construction of personal and communal identity. They show how narrative research allows us to explore the unique way in which teachers experience their world; it enables us to generate valuable understandings about their identity, beliefs and practices. Kamler (2003) explains: "Stories do not tell single truths, but rather
represent a truth, a perspective, a particular way of seeing experience and naming it. Stories are partial; they are located rather than universal" (p. 38, my emphasis). Carter (1993) claims that "…story is a distinctive mode of explanation characterized by an intrinsic multiplicity of meanings" (p. 6). By exploring a variety of voices, a range of teacher perspectives, I am searching for complex understandings of the way that learning is experienced by individuals and groups in a particular professional learning environment.

Another reason for my choice of narrative inquiry is that narrative has been described as a suitable way to explore connections between personal and public affairs (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). Professional learning is indeed both a public concern (in the form of policy issues, teacher evaluation and student outcomes for example) and an extremely personal matter (individual needs and difficulties and issues of professional environment and interest for example). In this way, narrative is helpful when I am exploring the space between Israeli national policy and a particular site of teacher learning.

In this narrative inquiry, I collected and generated stories from my teacher participants and embarked on a process of reading, rereading and 'restorying' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Initially these educators told their stories online in a closed discussion group. Restorying those texts, the teacher writers were required in the course to revise their narratives, this meant adding reflective comments about the story and the writing process. I too was engaged in restorying the narratives as I responded to them and wrote about the experience in my own reflective writings. That process of restorying continued throughout the text analysis and is still evolving in the writing of this paper.

**Data analysis.**

Paul Sullivan (2012) argues that a dialogical approach to data analysis enables the researcher to explore a complex and conscious subjectivity” (p. 43). According to the author, a dialogical approach to analysis is particularly suitable for grappling with questions of lived experience, identity and the interpretation of action.
For Bakhtin, dialogue is not just a mode of interaction but, rather a way of social life in which people establish multifaceted relationships between self and the Other, between a person and culture and between cultures. The dialogical model of life Bakhtin describes assumes that consciousness, meaning and understanding are never finalized but their dynamic formation depends on continuous interaction with difference - other voices and worldviews.

Examining my own texts and those written by my teacher-students from a dialogical perspective makes taken for granted assumptions visible. Understanding the rhetorical features of double voiced discourse such as ‘sideways glance’ (Sullivan, p. 53) and hidden dialogue’ (Sullivan, p. 56) afford a closer view of practice and professional beliefs. This analysis centres on a continuous attempt to identify voices of self and other in my data. According to Welch (1998), “A Bakhtinian reading enables students and teachers to recognize the multiple perspectives and multiple messages a simple text communicates through its moldable, reverberating collections of personal and public voices” (p. 501). Our speech, oral and written, according to Bakhtin, is filled with the words of our others. In analyzing the data presented to me in this study, I attempt to identify and critically understand those voices and the assumptions nesting within them.

In the following sections of this paper, I discuss the concept of dialogical learning and then attempt to critically explore the dialogical nature of the teacher learning realized in my courses on writing pedagogy, courses which are, as explained earlier, based in writing.

**Dialogical Professional Learning**

Bakhtin's concept of unfinalizability (Bakhtin, 1984), is explained by Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006): “Life is riddled with surpluses, remainders, loopholes, and anomalies that keep things unfinalizable and therefore always hold open the possibility of surprise, change, and transformation' (p. 50). I find this description particularly appropriate when I
strive to characterize the open-ended and flexible responsiveness of dialogical professional learning.

Dialogical learning includes forms of learning which situate teacher and students as partners in the process. These kinds of learning are grounded in deep recognition of the fact that learning is deeply social in nature. Flecha (2000) concludes that in a dialogical understanding of learning, knowledge generated is markedly influenced not only by the teacher, but by the group involved and the specific context in which the interaction takes place. The author explains that dialogic learning recasts educational sites into learning communities whose significant relationships are formed “creating new cognitive development and greater social and educational equality” (p. 24). In this dialogue, ideas are contemplated together and all participants share an equal role in the generation of the new knowledge which emerges. Mercer (2000) describes this joint construction of knowledge as ‘inter thinking’.

In contrast to Matusov (2009), who firmly argues that all pedagogy is dialogic in nature and that all educational encounters are intrinsically dialogical, other scholars (e.g. Boyd, and Markarian, 2011; Renshaw, 2004) assert that dialogical kinds of teaching and learning stand in particular contrast with other options. From this comparative stance, dialogic teaching and learning are different from traditional top-down forms of instruction in that they are not characterized by the linear transmission of knowledge from teacher to students. According to Renshaw (2004), dialogic teaching differs by "foregrounding the interactive, contingent, responsive and flexible features of instructional activities" (p. 6). In this kind of educational setting, curriculum is constantly open to interpretation and questioning and time is allocated according to the needs of the participants, pace of comprehension and the understandings generated along the way. O'Connor and Michaels (2007) agree with the studies mentioned here that dialogical learning is not entirely predetermined and that participants are all potential contributors to a democratic educational dynamic, but continue on to argue that dialogism in the classroom embodies particular "possibilities for critique and creative thought" (p. 277). In this sense, in dialogical classrooms, the outcomes of learning are often unanticipated.
Dialogical learning takes into account that each learner is unique and arrives at the site of learning equipped with knowledge, cultural perspectives and a range of personal and professional experiences. Returning to professional learning for teachers, this uniqueness must not only be acknowledged, it should be valued. When teachers join a group and embark on professional learning, they indeed contribute to the character of the group and the directions taken in the program in many ways. The stories they tell, the questions they ask, the experience they bring and the comments they make all determine emphasis and turns taken in the learning.

Concluding this introduction on dialogic teaching and learning, before I contemplate my own practice as a leader of professional learning, I wish to highlight a note of caution sounded by O'Connor and Michaels (2007) regarding the temptation to oversimplify the classification of approaches to learning as either monologic or dialogic. There are of course a multitude of approaches on the spectrum between the two.

**Exploring the dialogical nature of this kind of professional learning for Israeli L1 teachers**

In my understanding, the courses I facilitate for Israeli L1 literacy teachers are dialogical in nature in several ways. First of all, the course opens with direct and personal communication between myself as leader of the program and the teachers enrolled in the course. Following a relational approach discussed by Julian Kitchen (2005), I begin the first session with a letter that I have written to the teachers about myself, my background both personal and professional and my aims for the course. In that letter I stress the role of the teacher participants in the generation of knowledge in the course and I invite them to engage with me in further conversation. After reading the letter, the teachers respond to me in writing and those letters direct the curriculum in many ways in the following sessions. I am genuinely interested in the teachers sitting before me and I have found that the letters enable me to begin to forge relationships with the teachers immediately, a necessity in a 30 hour course. Using the Bakhtinian term (Bakhtin, 1984), there is marked
polyphony in the letter I write to the participants – a variety of voices is present in multiple ways in the text.

My letter is at once personal and professional. I begin with some person details:

I was born in Australia and I moved to Israel at the age of 21... It is important for me to tell you that although I have lived here for many years, I still make mistakes in Hebrew...

but quickly move to professional matters: “For over 15 years I have worked as a leader of professional learning in language and literacy...”. I describe myself as a classroom practitioner – “Nothing excites me more than a child who discovers the wealth involved in reading a terrific book or succeeds in creating a significant text...” – and as a teacher educator – “Writing is a complex task which involves aspects of language, cognition, environment and emotion...”. I characterize myself as a leader – “In my teaching I will model teaching techniques which may help you cope with your pupils...” – and as a colleague: “I am aware that you are arriving... exhausted at the end of a long and demanding school day... I know this as I live the same reality...” In my writing I both identify with the difficulty encountered by teachers arriving at the course after a long day at school and yet encourage them to make the most of the time spent in the sessions.

The groups of teachers attending the course are usually extremely heterogeneous. I have early career teachers together with veteran educators who have been teaching for longer than I have, and other experienced teachers who fulfill additional roles in their schools. My colleagues, leaders of professional learning in the area of language and literacy, often enroll in the course too. I position all of these educators as partners with me in the exploration of ideas in the course, yet it is always clear in the session who is leading the professional learning. In this program, there is mutual respect and an honest invitation to bring your own teaching experiences to the program. The message, both declared and implied, is that all the teachers in the group have stories to tell, dilemmas they face and something to learn about writing pedagogy. I myself am of course included.
Although clear goals are set out before the course begins, authorized by representatives of the Ministry of Education and published ahead of time on the Internet, the program is always a basis for mutual discussion and changes according to the needs of the teacher-students and the dynamics emanating within the group. With each cohort, over the past 7 years, I have witnessed the course developing in unique ways – for example, when the course was held in a city where there was a high ultra-religious population in which boys and girls study separately, issues were raised that were very unique. When the group was made of both Arab teachers (studying in their second language) and Jewish teachers (studying in their mother tongue) the dynamics and the issues discussed were again very distinctive.

As described earlier, the teachers in the program write and share teaching narratives surrounding their classroom practice and the teaching of writing. The context of these stories is usually the professional environment in which the teachers work and that environment is apparent in those stories, either in the background or the foreground in many ways. The assumptions behind those unique narratives influence the professional conversation in the course in many ways and teacher assumptions must be acknowledged in the process of generating new knowledge.

An example of this is apparent in the writing of Veronica, a teacher who participated in the course in 2014. She opened the first narrative she wrote in the course, as follows:

*Years ago, when I began teaching, I replaced a grade two teacher on maternity leave. In the class I found a student who wasn't prepared to function as a student, which means: to take out his equipment, to be disciplined and respond to instructions, to fulfil school rules, and become connected to the other students. It is not necessary to say that he didn't want to write...* (Dec. 2014).

In the introduction of her teacher narrative, Veronica presents what she believes is the role of a school student. This description may reflect her own school experience as a student, the teacher preparation she received, the conventions in her school or the message she received in another professional learning program. The connections she makes in passing, between writing and discipline fascinated me and led the way to in-
depth discussion. It is interesting to explore the very different assumptions apparent in the
text produced by Aya, another teacher in the same group.

**Aya’s story.**

Aya, a grade five teacher concluded her first narrative in this way: "I'm not a writer and
don’t claim to be one, I am just a teacher trying to advance writing processes". The
words "just a teacher" are seemingly rooted in the Israeli context in which many teachers
do not feel they are valued (Nachum-HaLevi, 2004). Needless to say, if a teacher works
in a system in which she feels that her work is not considered important, it can influence
her practice in many ways.

In order for learning in the course to be significant, those conventions and beliefs
teachers bring with them must be recognized and critically engaged with in relation to the
new content being presented. In my role as leader in the course, I see it as important that I
throw light on the ways in which assumptions are entering the narratives and sometimes
shadowing the teacher’s practice. In the case of Aya who saw herself as "just a teacher",
I felt obliged to react to that self-deprecation before responding to the main theme of her
story. My response began:

> Dear Aya, I will begin from the end - I don’t agree with you that you are
> "just a teacher", you are a caring and creative teacher who views her
> class as a group of students with differing abilities, varied strengths and
> weaknesses, assorted special interest areas and different knowledge...

Hallman (2011) returns to the work of Bakhtin to describe the richness in dialogical
teacher interactions such as these:

> As teachers, for example, reflect on their practice in writing, their
> reflections become populated with many voices – voices of others, the
> institutions in which they work, and the jargon of teacher education itself.
> This multiplicity and diversity of voices, or what Bakhtin calls
> heteroglossia, is present in every individual’s utterance. (p. 535)

These reflections draw on Bakhtin’s understanding that literary texts (1981) maintain a
dialogue with other texts and readers join the dialogue as they create their own
understandings. I adopt the Bakhtinian term ‘unfinalizability’ (Bakhtin, 1986) to describe
the nature of the ongoing learning generated in these dialogical settings. Even today, in
the preparation of this conference paper, I return to the texts produced in those courses.
Some of them have formed the basis of mentoring sessions I have had with teachers in
totally different contexts, other texts have made their way into other texts that I have
written for journal articles and blog posts⁴. Often in the classroom, in dialogue with my
own primary school students, I am reminded of teacher participants in my courses, their
dilemmas and triumphs, their students who were highlighted in teaching narratives and
the dialogue between us. The conversations and the written artefacts of the learning
achieved in those professional learning courses, continue to accompany me. Similarly,
they continue to accompany some of the teachers who later participated in my study. In
the next section of this paper I present some writing by Orna, one of those educators.

Orna’s story.

As another example of the dialogic nature of these professional learning programs, I am
presenting here parts of a teaching narrative produced by Orna, an experienced special
education teacher who participated in my course in 2011. In Orna’s story, she asked her
readers for suggestions regarding how she could deal with a difficult student.

Orna’s rhetorical strategy was to turn to her readers (plural) and explain “... as they are
children in the inclusion program, maybe you (as classroom teachers – N.A) have had
children with these difficulties and will be able to contribute from your experience”. At
the conclusion of her narrative, Orna once again turned to her readers: “...Maybe you
have other suggestions as to how I can work with him on improving the content of his
writing?” As a teacher writer she was actively using the task allocated in the course to
consult with other educators and to search for additional ways of improving her practice.
It seems she did not see this task merely as an assignment to be submitted for a grade, but
rather as an avenue for genuine conversation and learning. In a richly dialogical sense,
Orna is bringing her classroom experience into the course. In her narrative, she referred

⁴ See theisthoughts - http://naha1.edublogs.org
to knowledge she had gained in the course “As we have learnt, writing demands a lot of experience and this student has had little”.

Later, when asked to revise her narrative, Orna thought about the task and decided that she couldn’t change this first section. Understanding the open-endedness of the task given and in no way fearing that she was ‘getting it wrong’, she wrote:

\[
\text{When required to revise the teaching story, I left this section as it was, I didn’t see a need to change it, and I only added an extra section which explained what happened since I did the initial writing.}
\]

In the second section of her narrative, Orna crossed back and forward in time and presented her thoughts on her practice and her learning in an honest manner. She mentioned the dialogue she had engaged in with her colleagues and concluded in an unfinalized dialogic way, leaving the door open for future thought, new practices and new interactions.

\[
\text{Time has passed since I wrote about Adi and the meaning of that is that he is now in the middle of grade 6. I am sorry to say that I did not succeed in advancing him in writing as much as I had planned to do, as the whole computer system in the school collapsed…This brought me to ponder on the great assistance technology lends us, along with our dependence on it and our helplessness when there are problems…}
\]

Orna continued her dialogical stance when she referred to the work she still wanted to do. Writing in the first person plural, she talked about the collaboration between herself and her student, Adi. It was not his assignment or hers; she referred to it as “ours”:

\[
\text{We have written a new text, it’s a book – a report about a dance performance that he went to and I typed what he told me word for word. We will revise that text in the way that we learnt.}
\]

As a reader of her narrative, I was left pondering the ambiguity of this sentence: who learnt – Adi? His teacher? Both separately and/or together? And where was it learned – in the special education lesson? In the professional learning course? I am less interested in the definitive or correct answer to these questions, and more interested in the possibilities that all readings may be possible and valid.
The learning experienced by Orna and her colleagues reminds me of what Parr (2010) refers to as “the tendency for groups or networks of teachers to work in critical, dialogic, inquiry-based paradigms. In such paradigms, teacher-learners are knowledge builders and generators as well as sharers of knowledge and expertise” (p. 186). Parr goes on to discuss the divisions between these kinds of dialogue and traditional understandings of professional learning in policy throughout the Western world.

In the final sections of this paper, I wish to return to the policy environment in which this study takes place and discuss the negotiations which need to be embraced in order to maintain the dialogical nature of these professional learning courses while fulfilling the demands of the “Ofek-Chadash” policy context.

**The challenges posed for dialogical professional learning under the “Ofek-Chadash” (New Horizon) reform**

Over the seven years I have led teachers’ professional learning in these courses, several features of the Israeli professional development policy (Ministry of Education, 2008) have challenged my efforts to achieve the dialogical professional learning that I have discussed above, and that I am committed to providing for Israeli literacy teachers. These challenges include:

1. Time limits - professional learning courses recognized by the guidelines are usually limited to 30 hours.

2. The 60 hour requirement – teachers are required to participate in two different 30 hour courses a year in order to obtain advancement. Only one of these can be in ‘my’ course.

3. The pressure surrounding national benchmarks and student achievement in top-down examinations.

According to Israeli policy guidelines, a 30 hour course must be divided into 10 separate sessions. Participants are permitted a 20% absence which means that they can miss two sessions; more than that and they fail the course. As a result, sessions are short and I often feel that this gives a fragmented feeling to the course. In my view, a 30 hour course
is far too brief to attempt to achieve understanding of the writing process and its pedagogical considerations for the classroom. Indeed, before the “Ofek-Chadash” reform, the course that I was leading with Israeli literacy teachers was 56 hours and the learning was spread out throughout the school year. Teachers were linking dialogically between classroom experience and the course and back again, and most felt substantially immersed in the process. This sense of genuine involvement, of deep and long lasting engagement, is more difficult to develop in shorter time frames.

Another limitation connected to time is that educators participating in shorter courses are less likely to see themselves participating in a “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998), a learning community with potential for mutual and deep engagement and the sharing of knowledge. Forming a group with a shared identity is challenging in ten sessions. When the course was longer we spent a lot more time in dialogue – both within the whole group and in small group settings. When teachers come from different schools, different cities and different cultures, they tend not to make an effort to get to know others in such a short course. Many of the educators tend to interact with me as group leader and direct their attention, their questions and their comments to me, rather than addressing the group. This too seems to fragment the learning in the course into pockets of individual learning rather than being unified and shared. This undermining of a sense of community may also account for the noisy interruptions occurring when teachers reach interesting thoughts about their practice, and share them immediately with colleagues from their own school sitting next to them, rather than sharing them with the whole group. This can sometimes be a distraction and also detracts from the learning the group could be constructing as a whole.

Another policy requirement is for teachers to participate in two different PD programs at the same time: – two groups, two course leaders, two topics, two areas to try out in the classroom and reflect on, two final assignments to prepare. Having worked with teachers, both in schools and teaching in the professional learning course, my strong sense is that this detracts from a teacher devoting his or her time and energy to significantly exploring a particular area of professional interest or need. In addition, the policy guidelines often
prevent interested educators from continuing professional learning in a particular area because they are committed to enroll in a school based course or a compulsory disciplinary area, mathematics, for example.

There are additional challenges in providing professional learning in the current policy climate. In recent years, the content of the course has been shadowed by the pressure associated with high-stakes external testing – i.e., the Meitzav examinations (see Beller, 2013). Teachers feel pressure to concentrate on these examinations and prepare their students for them. In the course, when discussing “writing as a process” (Murray, 1980; Locke, 2010), ‘writing for learning’ (Emig, 1977; Newell, 2006), or writing directed by pupil choice, I am sometimes confronted by questions from teachers like: “... but that’s not what is required of them [the students] in the test, is it?”

While striving to maintain the dialogical nature of the course, I resist being drawn into the “teach to the test” (Popham, 2001, p. 16) tunnel that some of the teachers insist on coaxing me in to. In most cases we reach an understanding that succeeding in the test is indeed important but it won’t be achieved through simply drilling the children in test tasks. I reassure them that everything we have discussed in the course about writing and writing pedagogy should be relevant. For example, if a pupil knows how to brainstorm and plan the writing of a text, knows how to revise and believes in his or her ability, he or she should be able to transfer those skills and strategies to the very different context of writing an essay under test conditions.

In the next section of this paper, I turn to the writing of another teacher-student, Iris, as an example of the ways in which I negotiate between the national policy and the dialogical form of learning I am striving to achieve.

**Negotiating between situated dialogical learning for Israeli literacy teachers and national policy**

As described in the previous section, it seems it is possible to find a kind of working balance between dialogic forms of professional learning and the requirements of Israeli
professional development policy but this depends on flexibility, involves making various concessions and requires shifting and changing all the time as policy is not constant or stable. In Israel, there have been ten different Ministers of Education in office since the year 2000 (The Knesset, 2015) and educational policy has changed accordingly⁵.

In the framework of my professional learning course in 2014, one teacher whom I will call ‘Ita’ was required to perform the writing task which appears on the grade two L1 Meitzav Hebrew examinations (Beller, 2013). During that session, it became apparent that Ita had been unknowingly “teaching to the test” (Popham, 2001, p. 16) in her literacy lessons. For several years she had been working with her grade two students on narrative writing following a sequence of drawings. This activity, which is used in the national examinations to assess the writing ability of students in their first years at school, had in fact become a major part of the literacy curriculum in this teacher’s classroom. In a reflective piece of writing, Ita movingly describes what happened to her and to her students when she realized that the teaching of writing can indeed be a far richer and more dialogical practice than her previous ‘teaching to the test’ had entailed:

...I must point out that I have been a teacher for 20 years already... For years I have been laboring to teach the rules for writing a story, my students learnt: opening, problem, solution... character, place and time. Pictures in sequence, words you can use. And suddenly... everything was shattered. The whole doctrine, all the strictness and the details are only a means to achieve an objective assessment. This section of the Meitzav examination was created to enable comparison between students as easily as possible, that is really why there are pictures in sequence.

When I arrived in the classroom, I allowed the students to sail on their imaginations, to dive into their own worlds, to soar with their thoughts. The conventions were merely directional signposts, supports along the way.

I was surprised to discover how rich and varied the stories were. Even the illustrations were more colorful, full of detail and movement. And most important, the children didn’t stop reminding me that we have to

⁵ According to Vidislevski (2011) the political ranks in Israel often use educational reforms and changes as a means of advancing their political interests and are often insensitive to programs in process or those initiated recently by the previous Minister.
continue the writing. They waited for feedback and wanted to develop their stories. The simple technique of asking questions awakened wonders... even I, myself was convinced that I am indeed not criticizing, rather asking and showing interest, and that is how my comments were accepted. The children received my questions with a smile and happily went back to change and add.

Writing moved from being a task to being a (positive) experience, a magical window opened up my children’s worlds to me. The conversations between me and them about the progression of the story generated full personal mutual relationships based on listening. I am full of hope that I can include writing activities as part of the classroom routine, something daily which doesn't require outside help or special organization...

Apart from the new understandings Ita had generated about the examination tasks and authentic writing in the classroom, her writing here reflects the dialogic quality of the relationships she was beginning to form with her young pupils after reading their personal writing. In this sense, the dialogical learning she had experienced through writing in the course, was beginning to find its way into her own classroom.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown the kinds of dialogical professional learning for teachers that are still possible, despite the standards-based policy climate of school education in Israel, dominated as it is by the “Ofek-Chadash” reform. And yet it needs to be said that such learning should not be taken for granted. Reform guidelines which aim at standardizing and institutionalizing frameworks for professional learning, powerfully limit the flexibility and the open-endedness that I or others might wish to generate through our dialogic pedagogy. In similar ways, standards based curriculums and external testing are putting pressure on educators and heavily influencing the way teachers are teaching literacy in their classrooms. The short examples of my work I have selected and discussed here, show how it is possible to forge productive connections between national professional development policy and dialogical forms of teacher learning. The quest for ways to blend these seemingly mutually exclusive directions has become crucial for me
as a leader of professional learning. Just as I am committed to exploring the assumptions hidden in the stories written by my teacher-students, I am also obliged to be attentive to the assumptions – both hidden and explicit – in the ever changing guidelines mandated from above by Israeli policy makers. This constant process of negotiation is a major challenge for me, one requiring a great deal of flexibility and compromise. The complex relationship between these two entities requires innovative renegotiation for every professional learning program initiated and for each new group of teacher-learners; taking into account the background and professional needs of each participant.

In their report on professional development policy and practice in the United States, Jaquith et al., (2010) conclude that practice is often very different from the policies mandated. It appears that the context in which this study takes place is that very space, constantly being negotiated between Israeli professional development policy and the dialogical professional learning frameworks described in this paper.

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