Professional development through mutually respectful relationship: Senior Teachers'

learning against the backdrop of hierarchical relationships

Abstract

This article draws on interview data across eight months from Senior Teachers [ie experienced teachers who are subject leaders] in Egyptian primary schools, to explore how they described their learning during a professional development Project in which they led gatherings of interested teachers in Teacher Learning Communities. The article explores the hypothesis that an important ingredient for effective teacher professional development is an affirming relationship between the learning-teacher and their coach or peers. Carl Rogers' person-centred theory (1951 [1987], 1967 [1988]) from the psychotherapy context is explored here in an educational context where, as in many countries, hierarchical relationships control how professionals relate to each other and express themselves. The article concludes that an enhanced sense of professional value and authority can result from more mutually respectful relationships and become the bedrock for significant professional development.

Introduction: collaborative interaction

Collaborative interaction among teachers has been frequently described as a key feature of successful professional development (Bellibas et al. 2017, King 2014, Tannehill and MacPhail 2017) and is central to the structure of Teacher Learning Communities or Teacher Learning Teams [TLCs or TLTs]. The term 'collaborative interaction' refers to any situation in which the learner is being offered dialogic exchange with another person or people. From Carl Rogers' perspective (1951 [1987], 1967 [1988]), this person or people can provide support

for a problem that the learner wants to solve, by establishing a relationship with the learner that encourages them to trust their own experience rather than relying on second-hand knowledge. In this context, learning becomes a mutual construction between two or more people, who simultaneously open themselves to building new ways of perceiving and acting in the world. The purpose is the development or 'self-enhancement' of each individual as an outcome of the journey of continuous learning.

In our study we worked with Rogers' definition (1951 [1987]) of learning as: 'a change in the organisation of self' (p.390). We used this definition because Rogers' concept of self-enhancement involved the learner's reaffirmation of self in relation to others, which was specifically achieved through and as the process of collaborative interaction.

The Project and its adaptation of Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs)

This Project introduced into Egyptian primary schools the system of Teacher Learning Communities (or Teacher Learning Teams, as they were re-named in Egypt: TLTs). We adapted Leahy and Wiliam's (2011) design for TLCs but replaced their focus on formative assessment with a focus on learning and teaching English as a foreign language. After spending time in primary classrooms as a team of researchers (Authors), we perceived that some essential ingredients for professional learning were missing from teachers' experiences, with negative effect on teachers' development: specifically, opportunities for collaborative interaction and for directing learning according to individual need and interest. Recent reviews of teacher professional development suggest that TLCs (or TLTs) embody characteristics closely associated with sustained improvements in teachers' development (Belibas, Bulut and Gedik 2017, Earley and Porritt 2010, Leahy and Wiliam 2011, Philpott and Oates 2017, Stoll *et al*. 2006, Tannehill and MacPhail 2017). This improvement is

attributed to the fact that TLCs are founded on teachers identifying their own focus for and process of professional development. In this model, teachers are also expected to foster trusting relationships in order to collaborate with each other in order to learn. Other research underlines the strong effects of teachers' emotions on their practices, and strong effects of leadership practices on those emotions (Leithwood *et al*. 2008). Input from beyond the school may also be helpful, although the main site for development is the classroom and school, where the Senior Teacher and other teachers provide support. None of these foundational aspects characterised teachers' planned learning in Egyptian schools. Their absence could be perceived as one key reason for the poor performance of the primary education system in Egypt (see Hanushek, Lavy and Hitomi 2007, Sheta 2007, OECD 2018, WEF 2018).

Project processes

The Project we researched was a professional development Project for which we were consultants, which aimed to support the learning and teaching of English through establishing TLTs. We worked with seven Senior Teachers of English from six schools. We used the Project as a means to investigate the Senior Teachers' use of collaborative interaction and proactive initiative-taking. Senior Teachers were those who had been teaching for an extended period, who monitored the learning and subject teaching of less experienced teachers. The Project began with three training sessions during autumn 2015 for the Senior Teachers: 1) on leadership generally; 2) on coaching specifically; and 3) on leading TLTs. In February, we hosted a workshop in which Senior Teachers and their TLT teachers met to share and demonstrate their new ideas. In March, the seven Senior Teachers made a presentation at an international conference in Jordan.

Senior Teachers met every month as a 'team' of Senior Teachers to reflect on and express how their professional development was progressing and how their support to other teachers' professional development was flourishing under their guidance. Each Senior Teacher was then observed by one consultant as the teacher carried out an innovative five-minute 'action' in their classroom which was integrated to support their tightly-prescribed syllabus. The action was planned on an Action Plan during the collaborative meeting, to meet self-identified purposes. Purposes included, for example, improving speaking, focusing on struggling pupils, making learning more active.

TLTs were set up in each school, led by each Senior Teacher. In mid-November, each Senior Teacher led their first TLT meeting, supported by consultants. After this TLT meeting, the TLT teachers also tried out their self-initiated five-minute actions in their English classrooms which met the purposes they had identified. Teachers observed each other during one of these actions. In each subsequent TLT meeting, the Senior Teacher invited each teacher in the TLT group to:

- Express their experience of trying out the planned five-minute action in their classroom.

- Reflect on this experience, using collaborative interaction.

- Devise a revised Action Plan for the forthcoming month and choose a colleague to observe it.

As consultants, we provided significant amounts of input to support Senior Teachers' coaching skills as an alternative to more hierarchical approaches to leadership. We ourselves used a coaching approach to give support. We attended TLT meetings and observed classrooms if invited.

Our Project occurred at a time of flux in Egypt. Standards of attainment measured against international benchmarks had risen somewhat during the period after the popular uprising of 2011 but still remained inadequate (WEF, 2017-8). The uprising in 2011 deposed the military leader, Mubarak, and a brief period of multi-party activity ensued, followed by the *de facto* re-establishment of the previous regime in 2013. Prior to this re-establishment, however, social media had played an important role whereby anti-establishment ideas were disseminated. Although the political system at the time of the Project looked similar to pre-2011, people's experiences of having publicly expressed dissent had not been forgotten and might be imagined to benefit the kind of professional development that our Project was introducing.

Relationship in learning: unconditional positive regard

After Rogers, the emphasis on the learning communities in our own study emphasised the *quality* of relationships – between, for example, a Senior Teacher and their coach or mentor (ie consultant) in which the Senior Teacher had to perceive that the coach was *with* them rather than above or against them. Like Lave and Wenger writing soon after him (1991), Rogers suggested that learning and development would be blocked unless the learning relationship was based on mutual respect and mutually free expression of one's own experience through a process of genuine participatory exchange. The Senior Teacher's job in this framework was therefore to encourage junior teachers in their Teacher Learning Team (TLT) to express themselves and reflect on their own experiences without feeling judged. It was this reflection followed by expression that led to creativity. Such open relationships were, however, unusual within the professional lives of the Egyptian Senior Teachers we worked with. In their system, as in many global-south countries (or lower/middle income

countries, LMIC), seniority was assumed to be the trigger for respect and also the signal, out of politeness, to repress rather than express one's own views and feelings.

Rogers' rejection of traditional sources of knowledge

One key element of Carl Rogers' theory is his adamant refusal to credit power to traditional sources of knowledge whose 'locus of evaluation' was *external to the learner*:

> Neither the Bible nor the prophets – neither Freud nor research – neither the revelations of God or man – can take precedence over my own direct experience (1967 [1988], p.24).

In the Project on which this research was based, developmental interaction between Senior Teacher and the Project consultants (coaches), and between the Senior Teacher and their TLT (junior) teachers, demanded, in Rogers' terms, 'unconditional positive regard' for each participating teacher. This demanded a valuing of each person's insights and their contributions to others' learning. Ryan and Deci, in their seminal (2000) work, *Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being* followed Rogers by claiming that to communicate freely, the learner needed to feel connected to their immediate community. They needed:

> … a sense of belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture disseminating a purpose, or what in SDT [self-determination theory] we call a sense of *relatedness*. [This means…] feeling *respected and cared for* (Ryan and Deci 2000, p.64; our emphasis)

In the context of our Project, this unselfish respect for others' aspirations, without thought of personal gain or the exercise of hierarchical power, was unusual to Senior Teachers. In their system, participants often faced fierce competitiveness among colleagues who

themselves had been oppressed by those exerting power over them throughout their professional lives. Time therefore had to be spent with the Senior Teachers at the start of the project in clarifying and practising how a coach was expected to behave to achieve the best effect. Each participant was given a guidebook outlining the principles of 'coaching' that we were looking for, which included:

1. The coach intends to benefit the other person (the coachee).

2. Coaches listen with curiosity, to understand who the coachee is and what they think or feel.

3. Coaches do not solve problems for the coachee or assume any position of superiority.

4. Coaches assume that coachees know best about their own situation, based on reflection on their own experience.

5. Coaching is supportive, not judgmental.

Proactive initiative-taking in learning, through experience and expression

Contrary to the assumption that conformity was essential within a rigid hierarchy of authority, Rogers suggested:

> What is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others (1988, p.26).

Reviews of teacher development through TLCs (e.g. Philpott and Oates 2017, Tannehill and MacPhail 2017) indicate that effective teacher professional development depends on teachers acting as their own agents, proactively taking initiatives; in particular, it is effective when a learning need is identified as important by participants themselves and when action

is decided and supported accordingly. This is an often-overlooked aspect of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), particularly in countries like Egypt where ossified, university-based training still has a dominant place in the valued knowledge hierarchy. The organisation of TLTs in contrast focused explicitly on practice expressed by teachers themselves as useful for their own classrooms, based on their own experiences inside those classrooms. The 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991) was the basis for a gradual questioning of 'self' and movement towards a newly conceived 'self' on a long trajectory towards 'becoming a person' (Rogers 1967 [1988]), perhaps rephrased in this context as 'becoming a professional'.

Perceptions of the individual versus society

There is a perception that in the global-south or LMIC, how the individual is perceived is 'diametrically opposed to Western or at least mainstream US assumptions' (Atkinson 1977, p.80, cited in Ab Kadir 2017, p.242). Given that Rogers' model was specifically individualistic rather than, for example, societally-based like Vygtosky's (1962), our research regarding individuals' self-enhancement and initiative-taking could be perceived as in tension with common assumptions. It has been suggested, for example, that in LMIC, there has lingered 'a deeply entrenched culture of obedience and conformity… that compels the rights and privileges of the larger society over the individual' (Ab Kadir 2017, p.237). We were interested to find out whether our Project's individualistic approach, focused on individuals' feelings and expression, had benefit within this context and if so, whether it was indeed so 'diametrically' opposite.

Rogers stressed that the teacher needed to base their initiatives on their own views and feelings about experience, rather than waiting for things to be done *for* or *to* oneself. In

Rogers' view, unlike in the local Egyptian context, the learner willingly engaged in interactions leading to learning but they could only do so when free from fear of rejection or failure. No change would take place if the learner did not freely wish it; and being able to identify and express what s/he wanted depended on the sense of relatedness and freedom s/he felt in the coaching relationship and the community of practice. The learner needed therefore to be coached to consider various possibilities and then make her/his own decisions. Rogers warned, however:

> It is not a subtle way of guiding the client while pretending to let him [her] guide himself [herself]. To be effective, it must be genuine (1951 [1987], p.30).

Other important tools that supported the proactive taking of initiative were the teacher's own observation of how their actions were making change which 'can give teachers an authoritative basis for their views' (Philpott and Oates 2017, p.327). However, this process was not straightforward because it had to be thought through. It involved 'coming again and again through confusion to a momentary perfection of organization' (Rogers 1951 [1987], p.99).

Research design

The following paragraphs highlight the rigour with which this research was conducted. It used an interpretivist approach. Without denying the existence of a 'real' truth underlying people's interpretations, we were interested in exploring how this truth was constructed by seven Senior Teachers in Alexandrian primary schools and how we could make sense of these constructions in terms of self-enhancement through a learning relationship (Maxwell 2012).

Sample

Our research sample of Senior Teachers consisted of four women teachers from three National Institute schools, which were government schools with some private funding. We also worked with three male teachers from Al Azhar schools, which were government-controlled with support from Al Azhar university and mosque in Cairo. All participating schools were relatively disadvantaged socio-economically, but the Al Azhar schools took some of Egypt's poorest children.

From each school, one Senior Teacher attended the initial training (except in one school, from which two teachers attended). Funded and directed by the Education Development Trust, we as consultants led this development project as a team of Egyptian and English educators (two of whom are authors of this article, one Egyptian, one English).

Data collection

In this article, we present our analysis of the learning and development of the seven Senior Teachers who led TLTs, drawing exclusively on interview data. We refer informally also to our attendance at their TLT meetings in their schools. Using pseudonyms, we called the seven Senior Teachers:

Women: Laila, Farida, Samira and Ahlam

Men: Saif, Hasan and Yousry.

Laila and Ahlam were the most senior of the seven Senior Teachers in our sample. We carried out in-depth interviews with all seven Senior Teachers from six schools in November, January and May respectively, during 2015-16.   In addition, we interviewed the three male teachers in September 2015 but did not have the opportunity to interview the women at that time. The total number of interviews was 24. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90

minutes and was carried out in a private place. All interviews were transcribed and translated from Arabic as necessary by the Egyptian consultants.

Data analysis

There were several stages to our data analysis, which the two main authors carried out collaboratively. As interviews were transcribed, we studied the transcriptions and prepared our next interview schedule accordingly [September, November, January, May]. By May, we were very familiar with the data. Basing our strategy on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) we then looked inductively for themes raised in all the interviews. While our focus had always been collaborative interaction and proactive initiative-taking, other themes emerged in interviews too. We therefore drew aside those instances where collaborative interaction and proactive initiative-taking were clearly addressed and re-examined these texts for sub-themes. For example, our sub-themes included 'the need for self-enhancement', 'the coaching relationship', 'learning without coercion'. We consequently re-analysed the dataset again, with these sub-themes in mind. This time, we looked specifically for how each of our participants talked about the sub-themes we had developed across all their interviews. [After each citation below, the Senior Teacher's name and month of interview are noted e.g. LailaJanInt denotes the interview carried out with Laila in January].

Ethical issues

This research, both in its design and fieldwork, adhered rigorously to the BSA ethical guidelines (2002). The Senior Teachers were told the purposes of our research and what would happen to our findings. They had ample opportunities to withdraw from the research, which ran from September 2015 to May 2016; however, they were all keen to take

part and signed their consent willingly. Their identities have been disguised so that only the participants themselves could detect their real roles.

RESULTS

Senior Teachers' need for professional self-enhancement

It is perhaps fitting that we draw on some of Carl Rogers' theories to frame these Senior Teachers' development experiences. Monte (1985, p.590) wrote of Rogers:

> An acutely-felt personal inferiority and lack of self-worth were the guiding life-experiences that shaped [his] theories.

The Senior Teachers in this study all referred to feeling a lack of professional self-worth and the need for professional self-enhancement. This was mainly due to the fact that within the system, praise was given when it was systemically appropriate rather than spontaneously when a Senior Teacher made progress in her/his development or practice. In addition, it was not previously considered appropriate for them to talk about their own actual experiences and feelings, which gave the message that these were not valued. Yousry summarised the systemic lack of valuing:

> The teacher should be the most important person in education. We are responsible for the exam and the students and the parents. However, we are the least valuable person in education in reality [at present]… All the other jobs are cared about, the police and so on, but no one cares about us [YousryMayInt].

Likewise, Saif described the teacher as being 'the lowest person in the state… perhaps less than the rubbish collector' [SaifJanInt].   Samira pointed out how this sense of being unvalued could lead to apathy among other teachers:

They don't want to know. They like to do any old thing… because they don't take the highest salary… maybe they don't want to make any effort in classes [SamiraJanInt].

In the next two sections, this starting place of feeling undervalued is addressed through two lenses: a) how it shifted for all Senior Teachers and which supports led to this shift, b) what the results of the shift were in terms of Senior Teachers' experiences of self-enhancement.

Shifts in learning and effective support for learning

Shifts in learning and effective support for learning could be categorised as coming under four themes: 1) Support through the coaching relationship; 2) Support from others; 3) Support through taking volitional actions based on experience; and 4) Support through having a specific purpose.

Support through the coaching relationship

The role of a 'coach' or guide in supporting the development of the Senior Teachers (ie provided by the consultants/authors) was appreciated by all participants as valuable. The model helped Senior Teachers nurture a similar coaching relationship with their own TLT teachers. None of the teachers were used to being 'coached' but had usually been given orders instead. Farida described how the Project consultants' friendly, easy-going manner, during the cross-school meetings, had encouraged her to persevere and try to learn through the Project. She revealed that initially she had been afraid that consultants would judge her teachers' classrooms negatively because sometimes they used Arabic instead of English. By May, however, she explained how she eventually dared to engage with new ideas: her fear had transformed into a sense of powerfulness through the gentle collaborative interactions she had engaged in. She explained:

I used to be afraid of new ideas. I didn't know how to apply them. Now I can try

anything! ... Before, I felt I couldn't do it. Then I saw we could do whatever we

wanted and the result would be very good... I found it simple, not hard

[FaridaMayInt].

Ahlam explained at the start of the Project that she had not been able to discuss educational

issues with teachers in her TLT as she did not respect their authority sufficiently. By May,

however, she told us of the genuine exchange of ideas that had been motivating her

teachers and herself since the interschool workshop in February:

[The teachers in my TLT] saw the other teachers' ideas and this motivated them and

made them closer to me. They would come to me and tell me about things they had

found, like videos. Our relationship became more about exchanging ideas than in the

beginning. In the beginning, it was just work [AhlamMayInt].

Saif talked about the 'family' spirit of the Senior Teachers in the Project. Although not all

models of 'family' relationships imply the equality and freedom that his ideal learning

relationship enjoyed, it seemed that for Saif this 'family spirit' was inspiring because it

contrasted with the hierarchical relationships he was used to at work:

This encouraged us a lot. There wasn't a sense that anyone was inferior... I learnt it

from you and your academic background. You supported us like your younger

siblings. So, we were able to apply this in practice, not just in theory... What we do

with you [consultants], we do with our teachers, and the teachers do with the

students. It's a chain [SaifMayInt].

Yousry described by the end of the Project how the coaching approach, which now underpinned his leadership of TLT teachers, encouraged his teachers to interact and reflect rather than just obey orders, as in the traditional leadership model. In May, he added:

> [The coaching approach] makes you lead without the person in front of you feeling less than you… It makes them feel that they are doing this themselves, not that I am ordering them to do it [YousryMayInt].

Hasan told us that he himself and his teachers had "changed from the worst to the best". He expressed it as follows:

> The way I deal with the teachers has totally changed. I no longer just give orders, we exchange ideas… In the past, teaching was dictatorial… It wasn't participatory. I was the manager. Now, it's different [HasanJanInt].

He went on to describe how he had developed empathy in the coaching relationship:

> I put myself in the teacher's shoes. If I were in their shoes, what would I do in class? I started to talk to them about this. What do we want to do? Not what I, Hasan, want to do. I don't say, "Mohamed, please do this in class!" I changed this idea [HasanJanInt].

The 'coaching' relationship had even spilled over into the classroom in this sense expressed by Hasan (above), that everyone's views were important, even though he remained as their leader or guide. Yousry told us that he had come to see his teaching role not just as teaching children but as "forming people". However, "forming people" did not happen immediately:

> It needs patience. Changing people. We aren't business people. We are forming people. Forming people needs a lot of patience [YousryJanInt].

Similarly, Hasan's vision was now to develop human beings who could interact fruitfully in the world. This included becoming "good members in society", pursuing successful careers such as being doctors and engineers, learning to deal with a range of people and defending their religion. This was 'forming people' who enjoyed social participation in their society. This vision was similar to Saif's 'spiritual aims and motivation' [SaifJanInt], whereby one reason for caring particularly about English teaching was so that his students could 'explain Islam and Islamic civilisation to others' [SaifMayInt].

Support from others

The Senior Teachers in this study talked about establishing some form of coaching relationship, or at least positive exchange, with various others, which both surprised and supported them. Hasan described how 'sitting alone', without interaction, blocked knowledge. Without exception, the Senior Teachers came to appreciate in a significant way, how much more they could learn while engaging with others than they had assumed. Learning started to appear to them to be a two-way process as Carl Rogers had described (1987 [1951]). For example, Farida was emphatic about how supportive to her own learning the meetings were, in which all the Senior Teachers from the different schools assembled. She had never sat with teachers from other schools more than in a one-day training event. Yousry emphasised the slow yet affirming nature of building collaboration among this leaders' Team. He claimed that it took him half a year to get to know the other Senior Teachers in the leaders' Team because it was a very gradual process. However, through discussion with all the Senior Teachers about their experiences, he gained inspiration for his own new actions:

We visit, we meet. When I think we will meet, I have to think what I will say. This was the push, that someone is following up… The meetings were very useful, especially with the other schools. I saw their activities. I benefited from them. I tried to apply some of them. These discussions were very useful [YousryMayInt].

Both Yousry and Farida felt connected to a much wider and more highly respected community of English teachers, after making the presentation at the international conference in Jordan. As Farida expressed it: 'All of this added to *me*' [FaridaMayInt]. In other words, these factors changed how she viewed herself professionally in relation to others.

All the Senior Teachers described how more junior teachers in their TLTs helped them to think about their teaching and how to develop it. Ahlam described this process as follows:

We were all making something together. Everyone contributed their best, so we could create something great… When we all work together on one idea, and get something really good, it's much better than coming up with ten ideas that aren't good… As for the [more junior] teachers, I now feel there isn't any difference between us. The younger ones used to be afraid to express their ideas [AhlamMayInt].

Similarly, Samira's TLT meetings emerged from being a forum for teachers to get instructions, into a place for expressing new and practical ideas:

The TLTs were discussions. We were freer. We talked about things related to what we were doing – new ideas. We made suggestions and changes… We tried to find solutions, not just listening to each other's problems [SamiraMayInt].

It was notable that Hasan believed that constructive criticism was essential for his development. However, his comments must be understood within a context where peers normally complimented those they liked, regardless of their achievements. This would mitigate against the honesty and congruence emphasised, for example, by Rogers for a developmental relationship.

Support through taking volitional actions based on experience

> You want me to fulfil my purpose? Don't tell me how I can achieve the purpose! … It shouldn't be imposed on [teachers]. Maybe they don't like the style. They should not be obliged.

This observation [HasanNovint] embodies Rogers' emphasis on not accepting knowledge, actions or rules without first checking one's own experience. This approach lay at the heart of the Project and was referred to repeatedly by all participants, as supportive to their learning and development. It was particularly emphasised by the three male Senior Teachers. For example, participants valued classroom observations made by their peers, because they had chosen the observer whose views they had specifically requested. Because they themselves initiated these observations, they felt encouraged to make them useful and make changes based on the observer's comments. Yousry focused on the importance of a comfortable relationship between the observed teacher and their observer:

> The best thing about the peer observation was that we chose who would do the observation. You know this person, so you don't feel the pressure. When I watch my colleague teach, this is a new thing [YousryMayInt].

Hasan explained how different his own approach to carrying out observations had become:

Before the Project, teachers asked me to go into their classes, but I didn't want to go because I felt I wasn't doing anything. I would just say 'good' or 'excellent'. Now, people come to me and ask me to look at certain students or skills. Now I have *real* work to do… I would start by listening to them… I tell them, "I think it is this!" and "I think you should do this or this" and they choose. Before, teachers were afraid of me [HasanMayInt].

Hasan's choice of the word 'real' contrasts starkly with the shifting and whimsical evaluations made by some Principal Teachers, according to Samira. She explained in great detail the impact that students' and their parents' views had on the judgements of her school Principal. The Principal, Samira reported, would read the parents' Facebook Page and take at face value their comments about individual teachers which would influence how she dealt with those individuals in future. When we asked her why the Principal did not make up her own mind rather than being swayed by others, she replied: 'I don't know. This is something in Egypt not only in the teachers, in the schools, but everywhere… Some people use this to make the boss or the supervisor or the Principal against some people' [SamiraJanInt]. This common means for validating teachers was diametrically opposed to Carl Rogers' emphasis on unconditional positive regard as the cradle for learning; and also on each teacher making evaluations based on direct experience rather than hear-say.

Overall, the Senior Teachers clearly saw that when learners, whether teachers or pupils, perceived their own learning as 'personally meaningful' (Rogers 1951 [1987], p.427) they made the effort to progress. Saif, for example, could obviously see that coercion by those in superior positions blocked development, and this view was reinforced by the Project:

The best thing [about the Project] was that you didn't force anyone to participate. If I

was forced to join, I wouldn't participate well. When you feel you are there by

choice, this makes you want to try. We felt we could go and try, and we didn't have

to continue if we didn't like it. So we had nothing to lose. There were no penalties

for not joining... When you are forced to attend, you just sit there, and you won't

apply what you hear [SaifMayInt].

Support through having a specific purpose

Participants noted that an important ingredient in their development was the expression of

a clearly explained, shared purpose in the presence of their colleagues who would provide

ongoing support. It appeared that the clarifying of their own purpose, based on their own

experiences, helped them to feel that they were progressing towards a new level of

achievement in relation to their professional practice. This finding is particularly significant,

given how hard the teachers normally worked, but without a clear vision of what they were

working *for.* These insights relate closely to Bourdieu's concepts of *field* and *habitus,*

whereby 'habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world

endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's practice' (quoted in

Wacquant, 1989, p. 44). By identifying their own professional purpose, they could clearly

perceive how their work might benefit themselves and their students. Yousry repeatedly

mentioned his own purpose:

I have changed. I feel that I have started to work with an [alternative] curriculum.

When I go into the classroom, I know what I will do. I prepare my work. I have a

certain purpose. I want to change. At the beginning [of the Project], we set a vision

we wanted to reach: this is always in my mind. Before, I used to go into class just to

show them some words they would memorise. Now, I have a purpose, and I focus on certain students [YousryJanInt].

How self-enhancement manifested itself

 [Learning is] about opening up to the world around them! [HasanMayInt].

One aspect of self-enhancement in Rogers' theory was the experience of congruence and at-one-ness with self which allowed engagement with new knowledge to appear less threatening. One strong message that came through our interviews was the sense of liveliness experienced by the participants during the Project meetings and activities, which became a bedrock for their curiosity, innovativeness and creativity. It was this spark, this 'spirit', as Laila called it, that allowed learning to be set into motion. It was this energy that led the participant to start trying out new approaches. Participants all commented on how they had previously slipped into boring routines but how engagement in coaching-style relationships during the Project had allowed them to shake these up. They all stressed that this spirit embodied their own volition. In Laila's view:

> Anything that doesn't change will fail. If you don't develop it, it will die. You must innovate in everything or it won't have spirit … Over time, teaching the same thing, you get bored of what you are doing. It becomes simply a routine… I used the same activities each time. I was not creating anything. I started after the Project to think of other things [LailaMayInt].

In particular, Laila felt that older teachers needed to capture this spirit from their younger colleagues because older staff were more likely to assume that they did not need to develop. Ahlam, herself an older participant, described a spirit which was driving her learning by the end of the Project:

I have been teaching for 27 years, but now I feel something new. I want to keep

going [AhlamMayInt].

Once Senior Teachers felt safe and supported enough to engage with new ideas and

practices, they were then able to base their decisions on their experience of the success or

futility of the new approaches they had practised. Farida perceived that her coaching with

junior teacher, Gamila, involved solving 'real' problems and that this had obviously

beneficial results:

After I went to Gamila's class and saw her lessons and how the students reacted to

her, I respected her a lot more [FaridaMayInt].

Ahlam also focused on how 'real' issues had been addressed. She also described how her

teachers actually *desired* to try out new ideas because they had come up with the ideas

themselves. She explained that when a teacher tried out one of her own ideas and it

worked, this in turn made them "trust themselves more" and thereby take more risks. She

commented on the sense of self-enhancement that ensued: 'Success is a great feeling… This

feeling is powerful' [AhlamMayInt]. This was the case, even when appreciation came from

less senior teachers. This was a novel insight within the Egyptian system where only praise

from those with senior authority roles tended to be valued. A new conception of

appreciation therefore emerged, based on 'real' success. One important discovery for the

Senior Teachers was that it was not only the content of what others said which had

influence: others' enthusiasm or creativity could provoke learning too. For example, Farida

became very motivated when she saw how driven and enthusiastic teachers from the

religious schools were, which she described as 'those who have the least facilities in the

world' [FaridaJanInt].

Samira described how she gained more confidence when she "felt the reaction of the teachers and students". She went on: "My confidence started to improve when it started to work better. I wasn't motivated in the beginning because there weren't many students participating" [SamiraMayInt]. In other words, her sense of authority seemed to stem from the tangible changes she noticed that resulted from her own changed actions.

Laila found the experience at the conference in Jordan encouraging especially after she and the other Senior Teachers had made their own presentation. Then she started to feel that she could do workshops for other teachers herself, because of a new sense of her own authority. In any future workshops that she proposed to give, she said that she would use the model demonstrated by the Project: allowing her participants to identify their own needs; and making sure that they were engaged and enjoying the workshop.

Discussion

It is against the backdrop of deeply-embedded hierarchical relationships that the academic significance of this article needs to be considered. This research project took place in the context of a global-south country (LMIC), where typically collaborative relationships were considered threatening and where conformity was emphasised rather than initiative-taking. Our research suggested that, despite this unpromising environment, Carl Rogers' theories about the key place of a 'congruent' person-centred coaching relationship applied to the professional development of the seven Senior Teachers in the Project schools. An unquestioning acceptance of 'decisions from above' was a long-established cultural behaviour founded in a reverence for age, wealth and traditional social status. Yet, once these teachers felt valued and authoritative because of the coaching relationships they had enjoyed, all seven Senior Teachers described experiencing a sense of self-enhancement

which led them to experience curiosity about their own experiences and take creative initiatives to improve their practices (Leithwood et al. 2008).

The application of Rogers' therapy-based theories appeared especially appropriate in a situation where teachers felt severely under-valued and disrespected. While this feeling may be common to many teachers all over the world, it was particularly acute in the settings where we did our research. This was why the 'coaching relationship' was proposed as a starting point for growth. Project findings suggested that this relationship did indeed provide teachers with a welcome sense of freedom to express themselves and develop their own authority. This was because they were not being judged but were being invited instead to exercise their own judgements.

It is true that the 'expression' in which Project teachers engaged could not be described as extensive. The Senior Teachers in this project still sustained a high degree of deference for external authority and always behaved politely. They particularly revered the Project consultants because we were both university teachers and fluent in English. However, the difference they noticed was that they were at least being asked to express a view, even if not deep feelings. They were being asked to express their own judgment on their own actions. This for them was a high level of expression compared to past experience. It was evidently effective, too, in terms of the Senior Teachers being able to take initiatives and so develop themselves and their practice, drawing on their own experiences and views.

Crucial to the process of development was ownership of purpose. This factor was mentioned repeatedly by the Senior Teachers and appeared to be a key missing element in their previous attempts towards self-enhancement, in which outcomes were determined by external authorities. The participants used the word 'real' on several occasions to contrast

their experiences in the Project with the directives that had been imposed on them previously. In Rogers' words, they seemed to be moving 'away from facades' (1967 [1988], p.167). In other words, their actions were based on their own concrete experiences and observations rather than political rhetoric, and this in turn gave them personal meaning within a professional context.

All the Senior Teachers referred to experiences during the Project that could be identified as professional self-enhancement. In particular, they began a process that Hasan called 'opening up to the world around them' [HasanMayInt]. Their sense of improved self-worth and congruence with trusted others set off a 'spirit' of curiosity, initiative-taking and creativity that in turn led to further learning and development. They all described a shift in how they perceived themselves professionally, from an undervalued teacher who lacked power and authority, to a professional who could make a significant difference to teaching and learning in their school and also coach others to do the same. Meanwhile, the continuous process of proactive initiation and learning was experienced as enjoyable and also infectious, so that other members of the teams were encouraged and supported in ways they had not previously considered possible. Our findings in this sense support the extant literature that focuses on the need to prioritise consideration of mutually respectful relationships, as well as individuals' own observations, in the development context (Moore, 2013; Author; Noddings, 2005). Our findings suggest that, to ignore these, professional development will be impeded, even in sites who have markedly different values from Carl Rogers.

Geolocation information

This research was carried out in Alexandria, Egypt, part of the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region.

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