Supporting the Continued Professional Development of Teachers through the Use of Vignettes

By Panayiotis Angelides & Paul Gibbs

Introduction

Over the last decades qualitative inquiries have become increasingly common in the field of educational research. Often, researchers report having struggled to collect, manage, and analyze their data. Existing methods usually require long-term engagement with the research context and, as a result, generate great volumes of data which are difficult to manage. In addition, they are time consuming and demanding of resources. This suggests that there is a need to find new ways of collecting and analyzing data in order to make qualitative inquiry more feasible, not only for experienced researchers, but also for schools and teachers who want to carry out investigations in their school contexts.

This article reports on a method developed for teacher self development. It is grounded in the classroom and within the everyday repertoire of skills and resources

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available for teachers. It is developed under the general rubric of action research which positions teachers as insider researchers of their own practice. Action research techniques attempt to engage teachers with their practice, to heighten their awareness of action within the process that affects change in the classroom. For this to be effective the actions of teachers and the feedback on their consequences of

theses actions need to be provided to teachers rapidly and in context so teachers can fully reflect and re-conceptualize their actions. In this article, we suggest one feasible method of qualitative inquiry which can help in the development of teachers within the context of their own school communities.

Although the existing research literature has many references to the philosophies of action research and their application in many educational contexts (e.g., Harrington et al., 2006; Warwick & Blatchford, 2006; Ponte, 2005) it is not rich with examples of actual methods which can be used for collecting and analyzing data to inform teacher practice. We recognize though that there has been some notable work in this area. For example, in a paper written mainly with external researchers in mind, Ainscow, Hargreaves, and Hopkins (1995) report the development of three techniques for collecting data for teacher development purposes. They argue that the rationale for these techniques is to help in the generation of research data leading to refinement of relevant theory. Angelides (2001) developed a further technique for analyzing school practice: the analysis of ëcritical incidents.í The critical incident analysis is a technique by which certain outsiders (e.g., inspectors or academics) collect, analyze, and interpret critical incidents that have occurred in a classroom, and then, in collaboration with teachers from a school, explore how that interpretation could inform improvement efforts. This technique could be useful to researchers and those within schools who are interested in identifying the details of practice, since it offers an efficient means of probing into the deeper working assumptions of stakeholders. It can also be used alongside others in creating a case study of a school and for making sense of the role of culture in school improvement (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000).

In this article, we take the idea of Miles (1990) about vignettes and the direct impact they can have on school practice, synthesize it with ideas from other scholars who worked with vignettes, eventually modify it by using a different definition of vignettes, implement the process, and try to find out whether it could be useful for collecting and analyzing data that can be valuable for professional development purposes.

Defining Vignettes

Different researchers refer to vignettes with different definitions, and they use them in a rather different manner (e.g., Ainscow, 2000; Alexander & Becker, 1978; Barter & Renold, 2000; Erickson, 1986; Finch, 1987; Miles, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Poulou, 2001; Pransky & Baily, 2002; Schoenberg & Radval, 2000). Poulou, for example, describes, vignettes as short descriptions of hypothetical persons or situations which contain the information necessary for the respondents to base their judgments upon. Similarly, Huebner (1991) argues that vignettes are written, fictitious materials including background, referral or observation information, which is generally held constant. In this way, Huebner continues, they serve the purpose of

activating respondentsí imagination and interest, and eliciting their written statements on the likert-style formats or checklists that follow the vignette.

Although these sorts of vignettes can stimulate teachersí interest in discussion, their hypothetical nature deprives them from being authentic or real and vivid accounts of practice, even when more richly textualised video vignette are offered. This is further exaggerated when there are disjunctures between the vignetteís characters and the respondents asked to engage with them. We believe that if vignettes emerge from school practice and if they are directly related (i.e., stories from their teaching practice) to those who will analyze them later, they can activate a more genuine discussion that can lead to better outcomes.

In a different definition, Miles (1990) describes vignettes as providing a snapshot, or perhaps a mini-movie, of a professional practitioner at work. This engages the professional directly to reflect on a recent episode of practice. He continues, first by describing it, and then producing thoughtful explanations. This technique, Miles concludes, combines a systematic, structured approach with the expression of ëemicí or personal meanings. Milesí procedure for the vignette method (or collaborative vignette) involves an intense collaboration between a professional and an outsider observer. The procedure as Miles describes it proceeds with the following steps:

> The professional is asked to consider a recent situation that ëturned out well, where his/her work was successful, where the outcome was good.í A typical outline with some headings such as ëthe context,í ëwhat you did,í ëwhat happened as a resultí is given to the professional. The professional then decides on a situation and writes an account using the heading guide. The ëoutsideí observer reads this account, makes marginal notes and returns it to the professional for review. The notes can be discussed between them. The observer then produces a revised and expanded version of the vignette, replacing real names with pseudonyms, and sends it to the professional for further consideration. After the professional reviews this version, it is ready for circulation to others involved in the same work setting.

We found this process very close to our way of thinking. Despite the fact that this method gives the right to teachers to define some research topics, it seems at the same time to limit some possibilities because the practitioner is asked only to consider a situation that ëturned out well, where his/her work was successful, where the outcome was good.í Although we could add further possibilities for teachers, we decided not to adopt this perspective but to look for a more ëcompleteí definition. Miles and Huberman (1994) define vignette as

> a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative, typical, or emblematic in the case you are doing. It has a narrative storylike structure that preserves chronological flow and that normally is limited to a brief time span, to one or a few key actors, to a bounded space, or to all three. (p. 81)

From a very similar perspective Erickson (1986) defines a vignette as

a vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life, in which the sights and sounds of what was being said and done are described in the natural sequence of their occurrence in real time. The moment-to-moment style of description in a narrative vignette gives the reader a sense of *being there* in the scene. (pp. 149-150, italics are original)

The narrative vignette, Erickson continues, ëis based on fieldnotes taken as the events happened and then written up shortly thereafter. The vignette is a more elaborated piece of literature, a more polished version of the account found in the fieldnotesí (p. 150). Thus, Erickson concludes, the vignette

> does not represent the original *event itself*, for this is impossible. The vignette is an abstraction; an analytic caricature (of a friendly sort) in which some details are sketched in and others are left out; some features are sharpened and heightened in their portrayal Ö and other features are softened, or left to merge with the background Ö The vignette persuades the reader that things were in the setting as the author claims they were, because the sense of immediate presence captures the readerís attention, and because the concrete particulars of the events reported in the vignette instantiate the general analytic concepts (patterns of culture and social organization) the author is using to organize the research report. (p. 150, *italics* are original)

We found the above definition more operational for our case, so we adopted it for our study. Vignettes, therefore, are vivid accounts of practice synthesized by the ëoutsiderí observer, who can interview soon (after the vignette is composed) those who are involved in it, in order to get their views on the account described. In this way, the observer can add further details or the opinions of the practitioners or pupils involved in the described event. Vignettes, Finch (1987) suggests, must be clear and consistent. She also adds that they must not be too complex to be easily understood by teachers. Instead, Finch concludes, they must be constructed to attract the interest of teachers and stimulate their imagination.

Vignettes, however, are not just vivid. Setting the advantages of vignettes, Miles (1990) argues that they promote reflection and critical thinking; they can stimulate, problematize and rouse interest; and they can evoke imagination, feelings and thoughts at the same time. In addition, with the use of vignettes teachers can easily express their own perceptions on topics familiar to them. Above all, Miles continues, the vignette analysis does not require much time or skill from teachers. It just requires, Miles concludes, conceptual clarity, editing skills from ëoutsidersí and a collaborative relationship between ëoutsidersí and ëinsiderí teachers. All these are crucial factors that can better assist us in collecting and analyzing qualitative data quickly.

Analyzing Vignettes

So far we have explored definitions of vignettes and their advantages in analyzing school practice. This has helped to explain the creation of vignettes and

how these can contribute to the generation of qualitative data. During this discussion, we have made a number of references to observers without specifying who they might be. In this context, the term implies those ëoutsidersí (inspectors or academics) who act as critical friends to schools, and their task is to monitor practice with a view to encouraging improvements. Within our own research, one of us worked as an outsider and experienced many dilemmas (Angelides, 1999). For example, when you are involved in a situation that has moral dimensions, should the observer intervene in some way? This draws attention to the potential ethical difficulties that might occur should the observer be a teacher within a school (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000). In such contexts, it would be essential to agree to ethical ground rules with all stakeholders in order to protect their interests. From this perspective, an outsider critical friend, Macbeath (1999) argues, can bring a measure of objectivity as well as a measure of support. At the same time, outsiders might be involved in assisting the processes of change in ways which the school feels to be appropriate. In other words, outsider critical friends work as part of a monitoring system that is essentially devised and driven by ëinsidersí (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000).

A critical friend according to Costa and Kallick (1993) is:

> a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a personís work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (p. 50)

A critical friend, Macbeath (1999) argues, can work with the school over time to assist in the process of change, bringing to the task experience of other schools and other approaches. To be useful, Macbeath continues, a critical friend must be someone with experience of school improvement and with expertise in working with a range of groups and in variety of contexts. In order to make this stronger Macbeath uses Elliot Eisnerís book *The Enlightened Eye*, the value of which comes from the accumulated wisdom of working with schools over a number of years. The ability to see what counts, Eisner (1991, quoted by Macbeath, 1999, p. 110) argues,

> is one of the features that differentiates novices from experts. The expert knows what to neglect. Knowing what to neglect means having a sense for the significant and having a framework which makes the search for the significant efficient.

Therefore, an outsider critical friend is what Elliot Eisner calls a connoisseur, a person with the ability ëto make fine-grained discriminations among complex and subtle qualitiesí (Eisner, 1998, p. 63).

In such a context, once the vignette gets its final written form it can be returned to the teacher involved for discussion. In this way, critical friends work in partnership with teachers, analyzing practice through the particular vignette. The aim is to develop better understanding of school practice from the points of views of insiders, and to explore in collaboration with teachers, how these can be addressed

in ways that attempt to support the development of those involved. With similar outcomes, a vignette in its final form can also be brought to a staff meeting for discussion with all the staff. Here the outsider has a vital role to play by asking questions in order to stimulate teachers to think of alternative practices. These questions can revolve around issues such as:

◆ Context (i.e., of the vignette).

◆ Power relations (hierarchy, conflict of interests).

◆ Organizational issues (structures, cultures, collaboration).

◆ Change (understanding the complexities of schools, introduction of innovations).

The process of discussing vignettes during staff meetings has a further advantage of helping teachers to develop as a team. Fullan (1991) argues that if staff development is to have a significant impact upon thinking and practice, it should be linked to school development and the development of the staff as a team. This process, together with the possible outcomes, will become clearer when we present the examples below.

In what follows we provide two examples that illustrate the potential of what we have proposed for gathering qualitative data rapidly, while at the same time, demonstrating how the procedure might be used. All names in the vignettes are fictitious.

Vignette 1: A History Lesson

This vignette was observed in a fourth grade of an urban primary school in Cyprus. It is narrated by P. A. as follows:

A fourth grade of 18 pupils sitting in groups of four or five. The history lesson is about ancient Greece and democracy. The teacher, Mrs. Alexandra, follows strictly the textbook although she has some group problem solving activities. The text is full of difficult terms and despite the efforts of Mrs. Alexandra to explain them the pupils seem to have difficulties understanding them. During the initial phase of the lesson, the children were looking at Mrs. Alexandra, each holding the textbook, and Mrs. Alexandra discussed the idea of democracy. She used questions to draw out the main points of the text but the children seemed to have difficulties in spotting them in the text. Then, the children were asked to work in groups and to discuss the characteristics of democracy in ancient Greece. It soon became evident that most children had difficulties in contributing to the discussion. Mrs. Alexandra stopped them and continued teaching from the front of the class, using an expository mode. During the forty-minute lesson only four pupils raised their hand to answer a question or to make a comment. In contrast, during the two previous lessons I had observed in this class – a science and a Greek language lesson—all pupils talked at least once. All three lessons were planned following the problem solving approach.

In this vignette we see the teacher who tries to teach history strictly following

the textbook but the children seem to have difficulties understanding the lesson. After the lesson we discussed our observations with the teacher, trying to identify factors that underlay Mrs. Alexandraís actions. During the discussion we reflected on the work undertaken, paying particular attention to the use of the textbook. We mentioned the way in which she had chosen to use the book in the lesson, trying to stimulate her to think about possible changes to her practice that would facilitate the learning of all children. In this way, the discussion moved to a consideration of various tactics used in the school as common practice. Mrs. Alexandra revealed numerous issues that we analyzed through our discussion. These issues are discussed below, together with the issues that arise in the following second vignette of this study.

Vignette 2: 'A Boy Sitting at the Teacher's Desk'

This vignette was taken from Angelides and Stylianou (2001). It was observed in a fifth grade of the same primary school in Cyprus. This vignette comes from a two-year project where, among other things, we aimed to help the schools involved to improve their practice. Tasoula Stylianou, co-researcher in the above project, narrates the following vignette:

> *It was my first visit to the class. A boy was sitting at the teacher's desk and was looking at me with an expressionless, strange glance. He was Costis, a boy from Georgia with Russian parents. When our looks met he smiled . . . . The mathematical equation on the board did not seem to interest him particularly. When Mrs. Antigone approached him he came back to reality, turned his head to his exercise book and began working. She sat next to him and they tried to solve the equation together. He looked satisfied. The rest of the children worked in groups trying to solve the problem. When the teacher drew away from him towards the center of the classroom Costis began 'pulling' grimaces at the children of the closest group. Mrs. Antigone began solving the equation on the board with the help of children. Costis copied it in his exercise book with rash movements, and the teacher announced a science test for the following Tuesday. As a result of the test announcement, Costis played lazy with his head on the desk and crossed his hands over his neck.*

> *When the bell rang Costis jumped up and rushed to the playground. When the children left the classroom Mrs. Antigone turned her look to me and I went up to her. Before having the chance to say anything she told me: 'Have you seen Costis? I keep him at my desk. I know that it limits his socialization with the rest of the children but I have not got any other choices. He is lost in the groups and at the same time he stirs up the other children. The case of Costis is a double-edged sword. . . .'*

In this vignette we see how a foreign child is treated in his classroom. The teacher appears to try to find solutions for the boy who does not speak the Greek language and has behavior problems, but she seems to have difficulties achieving them. She isolates him at her desk because, as she says, she does not have any other choices. Discussing this story with Mrs. Antigone revealed interesting interpretations of the above vignette. For example:

◆ Costis was very weak in the Greek language.

◆ Mrs. Antigoneís pedagogical beliefs did not support the practice that weak or disturbing pupils should sit at the teacherís desk.

◆ She was desperate with the situation since she had no support from anybody (i.e., supporting teacher, headteacher, inspector, Ministry of Education).

◆ According to the Cyprus special education law special teachers cannot teach pupils who speak a foreign language, because they are not considered as having special needs.

◆ The whole burden is on the regular teacher, who, following his or her own initiatives, has to find ways of helping children who speak a foreign language.

◆ The curriculum is very demanding, there are too many children (31) in the class, and so it is very difficult to find time for individualization.

◆ The Ministry of Education and Culture does not seem to be giving the necessary emphasis to the in-service training of teachers to enable them to teach foreign pupils effectively.

The next stage was to bring these vignettes together with the teachersí interpretations to a staff meeting for discussion. During the discussion we tried to stimulate the teachers to think about possible changes to their practice and to their school as an organization that would facilitate the learning of all children. For example, for the first vignette we asked questions such as:

◆ Why do you think Mrs. Antigone followed the textbook strictly?

◆ Why do you think children had difficulty understanding the text?

◆ How could we make them interested in the lesson?

◆ What changes could we introduce to improve our practice?

◆ What can we change in our school in order to avoid such situations?

For the second vignette we asked questions like the following:

◆ Why do you think Mrs. Antigone had Costis sitting at her desk?

◆ Why do you think Costis was not interested in the lesson?

◆ How could we make him interested in the lesson?

◆ How would you treat such a boy in your class?

◆ Do you have specific suggestions? Have you used them in your class? Why not, or with what results?

◆ What would you change in the school as an organization in order to help the leaning of all children in general and those like Costis in particular?

◆ What would you suggest to the Ministry of Education for improving the situation?

Using these questions (and many others) as a stimulus for discussion we finally arrived at the following conclusions:

◆ The curriculum, as it is presented in the textbooks, is sometimes difficult for pupils to understand and for teachers to teach. In such cases we can insert, in the textbookís pre-structured lesson, modifications by setting obtainable goals and simplifying the language and the exercises, so there is appropriate work for all children. This can be carried out with the collaboration of a team of teachers, under the direction of the headteacher.

◆ Some teachers reported that they had sometimes prepared extra work, but only for the high achievers who finished their work first. Discussing this issue we reached the conclusion that where possible we should make appropriate exercises for the low achievers as well.

◆ A number of teachers said that they tried to teach some lessons quickly, just to cover the curriculum, because that was the policy of the Ministry of Education and they did not want to get in trouble with their inspectors at the end of the year. We agreed that it was bad practice and we should avoid it.

◆ All teachers agreed that most lessons were organized on the basis of textbooks since it is much easier for teachers. Discussing this issue we concluded that lessons should be organized at the level and abilities of our pupils, paying particular attention to those that are marginalized, and that teachers should not overly restricted by textbooks.

◆ At the end of our discussion we concluded that we should not take anything for granted, but we must scrutinize our practice, looking always for alternative and more effective practices.

◆ We reconsidered the ethical and power issues potentially at play in this method, as are revealed by Barnes et al. (2003). Our personal justification for the method is that most significant insights are those involved directly in the vignette and reveal through refection, not by the external truths of the observers and commentators.

Concluding Comments

This article has explored and demonstrated that there is some potential in working with vignettes as an efficient technique for helping teachers to develop their practice. This technique can be used by insider teachers who are interested in getting away from the traditional ways of teacher development. The advantages of using this technique are that teachers do not require long-term engagement with the research field and the collection of data can be made in a short time. The volume of data is almost always manageable and the themes of inquiry are not very broad, because they are concentrated around certain vignettes. Furthermore, the approach provides a methodological way of analyzing data, a task that is usually rather complex, messy and not straightforward in qualitative research. The overall approach therefore saves time and perhaps money.

Working with vignettes to enhance the professional praxis of teachers we found

that there is some potential in using this method as an efficient means of improving practice. The analysis of a vignette as a means of exploring practice through the application of professional judgment has had a profound and remarkable influence on most of the teachers involved in the project. We witnessed some teachers being exited because their pupils were more successful and because they managed to bring about improvement to their schools and in their own practice.

Teachers wishing to improve their practice can seek the help of certain outsiders (inspectors or academics), who will act as critical friends to schools, in order to encourage teachers to investigate their own situations and practices. In this way, teachers can reflect on their practice through professional judgments within their communities of practice.

This method has all the advantages of collaborative, communal inquiry and understanding, since it brings together into schools, researchers (academics) or policy makers (inspectors) and practitioners. In addition, it is quick and practical. It does not require long-term engagement with the research context, does not generate great volumes of data, and is not demanding of recourses. Working together, outsiders and insiders can make sense of the complexities of school communities so they can prepare the ground for new innovations. At the same time the process of inquiry can help all involved to develop better practices and can encourage improvements to the school as an organization.

Vignettes analysis, as we have proposed, does have some limitations and raises a number of ethical issues. Miles (1990) pointed out that vignettes can be biased when outsiders avoid raising problem-situations or are self-serving, or when teachers describe themselves as noble, insightful professionals, with no flaws or doubts. However, this is an issue for the community of teachers, aided by outsiders and students, to become wise and virtuous professionals. It is for the community of teachers to authentically address these issues. From our experience in other projects some teachers may appear to defend their practice by challenging the outsiderís descriptions and interpretations (Angelides & Ainscow, 2000). Vignettes, there-fore, should be written in an appropriate form to minimize possibilities for tension and offence, as enabling the school community to grow into one where the authenticity of professional practice is the norm.

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