Participatory Inquiry-based Practice for Fostering Organizational Learning in Egyptian Faculties of Education

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In an increasingly globalized world, teacher education institutions, both nationally and internationally, have been transforming their programs to address "the needs of 21st century learners" (AACTE & P21, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). Yet, limited research has examined, a) how individuals, groups and organizations have coped with these reforms; b) what factors enabled or hindered changes; and c) how the process of change influences organizational performance and practice. Using Egypt as a case study, the primary research question is, how and to what extent does participatory inquiry-based practice foster organizational learning in teacher education institutions?

Participatory inquiry can be defined as a collective systemic process for acquiring knowledge and undertaking actions. Collinson, Cook and Conley (2006) emphasize the importance of inquiry within the process of organizational learning and change. For them, "inquiry generally occurs to resolve a problem, question, dilemma, or uncertainty and involves problem identification, data collection, analysis/ interpretation, and action" (p. 111). This is aligned with theorists' perspectives of organizational learning as a process of continuous cognitive and behavioral change through acquiring knowledge (Austin & Harkins, 2008).

At the beginning of the 21st century, Egyptian educators and government officials (as well as representatives of bi-lateral and multi-lateral organizations) raised criticisms and proposed changes in the organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation mechanisms in teacher preparation programs (Megahed & Otaiba, 2008). In 2004, the Egyptian government implemented concerted reform efforts, and demonstrated a commitment to improving the quality of teacher education institutions. The World Bank and USAID reinforced this commitment when they put the issue of pre-service teacher education on their agendas – and committed funds to Egypt for this purpose. However, almost a decade of international-supported reform efforts later, there have been limited studies to examine the extent to which the reforms have improved the organizational performance (Ginsburg & Megahed, 2011). A powerful indicator of the limited organizational change is evident by the fact that only one of the 27 faculties of education has succeeded in receiving national accreditation (NAQAAE, 2013).

In this research, we adapt the "Framework for 21st Century Student Outcomes and Support Systems in Educator Preparation" to trigger a process of organizational (individual and collective) change, and to examine its dynamics and evaluate its influences. The Framework represents the reference point for identifying the desired changes in teacher education programs, as it "describes the skills, knowledge and expertise students must master to succeed in work and life—a blend of content, knowledge, specific skills, expertise and literacies" (AACTE & P21, p.8). The research focuses on evaluating program design, which includes curriculum, instructional models, and assessment in educator preparation - with a special emphasis on the integration of information, communication and technology (ICT) as an instructional tool.

To examine the extent to which participatory inquiry-based practice fosters organizational learning, faculty and teaching assistants need to engage collectively in this practice. Thus, a dual process has been undertaken, which includes, a) capacity building through inquiry-based practice for fostering organizational learning, and b) documentation, monitoring, and evaluation of organizational transformation through a mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative)approach. Faculty members and teaching assistants at one Egyptian teacher education

institution are currently involved in a series of workshops in order to enable them to assess the status of their respective programs; identify gaps in the integration of the 21st century skills and knowledge; and undertake changes for bridging the gaps and improving organizational performance. Concurrently, we are facilitating, monitoring and reporting on this process in order to assess its impact on organizational performance.

This research offers a thorough examination of the process of organizational change in teacher education in Egypt. During its current period of political transition and socioeconomic unrest, Egypt represents an interesting context. The research sheds light on social and cultural challenges and/or opportunities for organizational transformation during a nationwide post-revolt transition, which offers illustration of the "notions of organizational learning … as both a means for achieving success in turbulent times and as a goal – a hallmark of organizational self-actualization" (Austin & Harkins, 2008, p. 105).The research findings contribute to the literature of organizational learning, focused on systems undergoing major transitions and institutions with highly centralized organizational cultures, which are financially challenged, and resistant to change. In addition, engaging faculty in a teacher higher education institution in examining and reflecting on gaps in the design and practice of their programs, and coming up with bottom-up solutions to develop their institutions will allow for strengthening the organizational capacities to enable individuals and groups to learn from their experience and seek continuous improvement.

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