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Encouraging the reflection process in undergraduate teachers using guided reflection

Andrea Nolan
Deakin University

THIS PAPER REPORTS ON the findings of a study conducted with a group of early childhood education undergraduate students. The study trialled a number of guided reflection techniques that acted to stimulate and provide a structure for reflection. These techniques were further supplemented by focus group discussions based on reflective principles, in the hope of fully engaging the students in the reflective process over the course of a year. All techniques were designed to assist the student teachers in becoming aware of the current philosophy they hold in relation to teaching and learning, and also in understanding how this has been shaped by past experiences, beliefs and knowledge. The effectiveness of the guided reflection techniques were evaluated by the participants at the end of the project. The surveys showed that three of the techniques were particularly successful. Student perceptions as to the success of the process are reported in this paper.

Introduction

Much has been written about the benefits of reflection as a practice for teachers (Arzt & Armour Thomas, 2002; Margolis, 2002; Mays, 2001a, 2001b; Moore, 2002; Rock & Levin, 2002; Swain, 1998). However, earlier debates centred on the difficulties of defining what reflection is—making it problematic to implement—and whether it could be reasonably expected that pre-service teachers had the capacity or inclination to critically reflect. Current literature proposes more clearly defined indicators of reflection and levels to aspire to, and the notion that the skills for reflection can be taught and should play a major role in pre-service teacher education courses.

Through engagement in the reflective process, teachers are provided with the opportunity to generate connections between theory and practice, and deepen their understandings in relation to their beliefs and experiences while adopting fresh perspectives (Risko, Vukelich, Rosekis & Carpenter, 2002). As Corcoran and Lally (2003) state, ‘successful teachers are fully engaged in the reflective process’ (p. 33). The ability to systematically and deliberately use reflection as a learning tool in professional practice, however, requires conscientious development over time in pre-service and post-service courses (Atkins, 2005). The literature is clear that the development of reflective practice requires skilled facilitation and appropriate guidance and support from educators (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Pege, 2001; Johns, 2004).

Engaging student teachers in the reflective process

While there is a growing consensus among teacher educators as to the value of reflection in the development of teachers, according to Ward and McCotter (2004), the process of reflection itself has been ‘an invisible process to many of our pre-service teachers’ (p. 255). If this is the case, it is of utmost importance that student teachers are introduced to the practice of reflection in a supportive environment so that they can think critically about learning and teaching.

Authors such as Mezirow (1981), Brockbank and McGill (1998), Kim (1999) and Bolton (2001) all emphasise that reflective practice is a learning and developmental process enacted through the examination of one’s own practice, including experiences, thoughts, feelings, actions and knowledge. In other words, for student teachers to fully engage in reflection they need to have a clear view of their own philosophy and be prompted to consider how their beliefs,
experiences and knowledge have shaped the theories they apply to teaching and learning. Whitten, Sinclair, Barker, Nanlohy and Nosworthy (2004) suggest that reflection is about looking inside yourself or upon your experiences to make sense of or improve the situations and your experiences in it (p. 220). Working from an awareness and understanding of their own beliefs and values, student teachers can then be challenged to consider a wider range of discourses, an aspect that Phelan (2001) argues is vital in recognising the discourses that shape and often restrict thinking. Viewing reflection in this way, the focus comes from a personal/practice orientation so that students gain an understanding of their own beliefs which act to shape their practice. As Larrivee (2000) states, 'Without tying teaching decisions to beliefs about the teaching/learning process and assumptions about, and expectations for students, teachers will have only isolated techniques. Unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery, they stay trapped in unexamined judgements, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations' (p. 294).

While it is difficult moving student teachers beyond personal frames of reference to draw on a broader range of more critical discourses (see study by Johnson, 2002), an important starting point is to establish an awareness and understanding of previous experiences that have shaped professional identity. A study by Nolan, Brown and Deans (2006) found student teachers, when engaged in processes that guided them in their reflections, were more able to gain a better understanding of their beliefs, values and experiences which impacted on their emerging early childhood professional profile. These student teachers acknowledged how the guided reflection process had encouraged 'deep reflection and had challenged them to "reassess" their "professional identity."'

Lesher and Trafford (2006) have found that 'encouraging student teachers to think about their past raises their reflections and learning to a meta-level of appreciation' (p. 23). This is also supported by Strong-Wilson (2006), who views childhood stories as especially powerful in shaping teachers' perceptions of self and others. It is therefore important that student teachers are asked to recall and reflect on aspects of their childhood and past experiences. 'When teachers connect stories that have been important to them with counterstories that they have implicitly excluded, they "waken" to their landscapes of learning' (Strong-Wilson, 2006, p. 110).

The inclusion of some type of group discussion also appears to be an important aspect of engaging student teachers in the reflection process. When reflecting on personal stories and incidents and then sharing these thoughts in a supportive peer group environment, consideration can be given to the social, political, historical, economical and ethical contexts that have shaped our identity. As Greene (1995) states, by becoming more aware of our own stories we become open to the stories of others. Discussion with others tends to provide alternate perspectives, which solitary working within personal epistemologies and beliefs may hamper (Walas & Gatterl, 2004). Fisher (2003) proposes that dialogue between teacher and learners, and between fellow learners, is necessary to obviate the possibilities of self-deception which critical reflection as self-reflection invites (Brookbank & McGill, 1998). The importance of and emphasis on group dialogue therefore becomes an essential part of the process.

The guided reflection project

Five student teachers from the second year of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education course offered at The University of Melbourne volunteered as participants for this study which involved them working through planned experiences and then sharing their responses in four focus group meetings throughout the year. In preparation for each meeting the student teachers were asked to undertake certain experiences using a variety of guided reflection techniques. Their responses then formed the basis of discussion at the meetings. The intention of the focus group meetings was to expose the participants to 'other ways of thinking' that perhaps they had not contemplated, while becoming clearer about their own philosophy. The meetings revisited and questioned their philosophy statements in light of their reflections, requiring them to consider why they believed what they believed. The meetings acted as a way of providing time, and a safe and nurturing place where thinking and talking about thinking could take place with the aim to become 'more wise and courageous actors in the world' (Wheatley, 2002, p. 9).

The reflection techniques

While the literature nominates a variety of approaches to facilitate the development of reflection, the study reported here used a learning experience approach interspersed with focus groups. By using a variety of techniques it was hoped to enable students to be fully engaged in the reflection process. For each planned experience there were accompanying questions to guide the student teachers in their reflections, and the complexity of what was required of the participants intensified over the course of the project. The techniques were designed to assist the participants to become more knowledgeable about the formulation of their current philosophy of teaching and learning, while being supported in their understanding of the processes that impact on this. The student teachers were asked to:
Recall past experiences, memories and critical incidents

This involved them recalling their own school days and the qualities and characteristics displayed by some of their own teachers; connecting with their own childhood memories about learning, and applying a framework (Gibbs, 1988) to analyse a critical incident in their own development.

Consider personal qualities

In light of the admirable qualities student teachers recalled of their own teachers, they were asked to think about the qualities they themselves displayed and how these mapped with characteristics and qualities they considered important in being a teacher.

Draw

This planned experience asked student teachers to draw their representation of what a teacher looked like.

Use metaphor

An animal or combination of animals had to be chosen to closely match each student teacher’s idea of a teacher. Choices then had to be explained.

Create a montage

Through the resources provided (magazines) student teachers constructed a montage to represent their philosophy of teaching and learning.

Develop a glossary of terms

Student teachers were asked to develop their own glossary of terms commonly used in early childhood education which were important to them.

Read and comment on journal articles

A number of prescribed articles outlining differing views of education needed to be read and reflected on according to the accompanying questions about teaching and learning.

Consider photographic images

The student teachers were provided with a selection of photographs depicting children involved in different learning contexts (formal school settings, natural settings, etc.) on which they were asked to comment.

The focus group meetings

The four focus group meetings were spread evenly through the year. While it was planned that each meeting would last for approximately one-and-a-half hours, some meetings continued for up to three hours because of the student teachers having so much they wanted to share with each other and not wanting to stop the discussion.

The atmosphere of these meetings was deliberately one of inclusion and acceptance. Every effort was made to help the participants feel relaxed. The researcher acted as the facilitator, initiating the discussion by asking questions related to the above experiences. The meetings followed a pattern of allowing each student to present their reflections but encouraging questions and comments at any time. This pattern worked well and the student teachers were soon confident enough to comment freely and compare their own reflections with those of the other group members at any stage during the meetings. By asking specific questions or calling on specific participants, the researcher ensured that each student had equal opportunity to be heard and participate in the dialogue. In an effort to further extend and stimulate the conversations in the meetings, the researcher would rephrase some of the student teacher comments or would ask for further clarification.

Data collection

Each participant in the project was given a large blank scrapbook in which to assemble all completed experiences and to note any issues they wished to share at the meetings. These books were brought to each meeting and referred to by the student teachers during the discussion. At the end of the project the books were collected and the data copied for further analysis. The meetings were audio-taped and later transcribed. These transcriptions became part of the database.

Student teacher perceptions of the project

As a way of ascertaining the participants’ perceptions about the project, an evaluation survey was created asking participants to rate the project’s effectiveness on a scale of zero to five (zero being not at all effective and five being extremely effective) and comment on each of the guided reflection techniques in relation to how each had:

- impacted on their ability to reflect more deeply about teaching and learning
- acted to clarify their teaching philosophy
- helped make connections between personal beliefs and teaching and learning
- assisted them in gaining a better understanding of underlying influences on their own development as a teacher.

The data from the survey clearly showed that, of the techniques implemented, some were considered more helpful than others in aiding reflection. Analysing their own past school experiences, creating a montage, and reading and commenting on journal articles were identified by the participants as being the most effective techniques to aid their reflection. Overall,
all techniques were looked on favourably as helping the participants to consider teaching and learning, with the effectiveness rating of these being strongly influenced by the learning styles of each participant; i.e. drawing activity was difficult for some participants while others found this very useful.

The evaluation survey required the student teachers to comment on the most enjoyable aspects of the project, the extent the project impacted on their ability to reflect, the usefulness of the focus group meetings and the timing of the project in relation to their own development as teachers.

**Enjoyable aspects**

When commenting on the most enjoyable aspects of being part of the project, the focus group meetings featured in all students' comments. The participants valued this forum as it provided them with the opportunity to hear other people's reflections and express their own opinions. As one participant wrote, "They [the focus group meetings] were so stimulating. I could have sat there for hours!"

**Project impact on ability to reflect**

When asked to comment on the impact the project had on one's ability to reflect, one student teacher wrote:

> Each part of the guided reflection project made you think hard about what you believe in and we were challenged personally as well as professionally about what you really believe in.

Another student commented:

> I do a lot of mental self-evaluation as it is but I'm finding that I have started to do a lot more now without realising it.

Four of the five participants rated the project as having a 'large impact' on their ability to reflect, with the other participant choosing the 'some impact' response.

**Usefulness of focus group meetings**

All participants valued the focus group meetings as assisting them to reflect further. Comments suggested that these group times had often acted as the impetus for the participants to reflect on their own philosophy:

> I often came away from meetings and reflected further because of what other people had said. This helped me to further clarify my thoughts.

> Other people's suggestions or comments spurred my mind on to come up with other ideas or thoughts.

It got me thinking why I agree/disagree with other's comments and the main reasons for this. As well as to reflect on my personal experiences, comparing them to the others' and thinking about why I feel/think the way I do.

By listening to other people's feelings and beliefs it challenged your beliefs and also aided in your thoughts.

Hearing other people's responses to the tasks helped me to reflect even further and deepen my beliefs and ideas. The tasks provided the stimulus but it was the discussion I found most valuable.

It was encouraging to note how participants would often raise issues that for them were unresolved from the previous discussion group, or refer to how certain points in the previous discussion had acted as a catalyst for them to reflect further.

**Timing of project**

Another question in the evaluation survey was about the relevance of participation in the project at this stage of the student teacher's preparation. All student teachers rated their participation as extremely useful and relevant. Some saw it as a good time to begin to analyse their thoughts about teaching and learning in more depth, having completed an initiate year of the degree course. For one student, participation helped her clarify where she stood in relation to what had been taught so far in the course.

**Discussion**

It is clear from the data that student teachers valued the experience of being part of the project and felt that it directly impacted on their own professional development, especially in relation to clarifying their own thoughts on teaching and learning.

> I have never been able to stand up confidently and express what I believe in before now, especially with my course, as I never knew what my beliefs were; it wasn't clear until now.

To varying degrees the different planned experiences guided the student teachers in their reflections, with most participants agreeing that their own level of reflection had deepened as a result of participating in the project. The importance of the focus group meetings stands out as significant in enabling this deeper level of reflection, with students commenting on this effect. These group meetings not only provided the participants with a forum where they were able to articulate their own philosophies and hear the thoughts of others, but also acted as a stimulus for further individual reflection.
Implications for early childhood teacher preparation

If we consider Dewey’s (1933) notion that knowledge is constructed and reconstructed through experience, it makes sense that we engage student teachers in talking about their beliefs, values and experiences which act to shape this knowledge. By involving student teachers in a variety of reflection techniques in which they are guided in the mapping and analysing of their developing identity as a teacher, and providing a forum for discussion about their perceptions, they will have the opportunity to gain better understandings of the underlying influences on this development. This was true for most of the participants in the guided reflection project reported here. As has been shown by other studies (Lones, 2000), having students present discuss and critique their practice with others helps them to be more able to realise their own current experience in a more detailed and meaningful way. In teacher preparation programs small group dialogue could take place during tutorial sessions as a way of enabling students to share their reflections.

McKendree, Small, Stenning and Conlon (2002) and Leung and Kember (2003) suggest that students need to be taught the skill of critical reflection, and this requires further consideration as to how this can be embedded within pre-service courses. What is encouraging is the increasing belief that reflective practice can and should be taught (Russell, 2003), and that any weakness in a student’s ability to reflect may be remedied using the guided reflection process trialled in this study. While the findings point to successful strategies that appear to enhance students’ capacity to reflect on teaching and learning, it must be stressed that this was a small scale study, undertaken by willing students.

Conclusion

Being critically aware of how teaching and learning approaches are shaped by experience, beliefs and values is viewed as a professional attribute necessary for effective beginning teachers (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1998). It is therefore important that teacher educators guide student teachers in the reflective process, helping them build an awareness of their own ‘theory’ from which decisions are informed, as well as aiding them to engage in a deeper level of reflection. Yost, Smtiiner and Forl ženza-Bailey (2000) view this as a primary mission of teacher education courses and something that should be present throughout courses. This project, although on a small scale, adopted a deliberate approach to guiding reflection and provided a forum for sharing reflections. The findings show that, according to the student teachers involved, their ability to reflect did improve, and that reflecting on existing knowledge and practice and sharing experiences is a powerful form of learning (Williams, 1998).

References


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