Reflecting on Supporting the Development of Reflexivity in Pre-Service Teachers

Reflective Practice, Pre-Service Teachers, Language of Reflection

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Learning to reflect | Reflection | Self-Study

This self-study emerged during a period of close examination of our teacher education programs for indicators that we are providing our student teachers with opportunities to learn how to reflect on what are they are doing in the classroom while on practicum, and why are they doing it, as a means to helping them to become reflective practitioners (Beauchamp, 2012). We are two colleagues who work in teacher education at a university in Quebec, Canada and we are deeply interested in reflective professional practice (Schön, 1983; 1987; Brookfield,1995). We decided to do a self-study to better understand our own beliefs about reflective practice and our roles in supporting the development of our students. The fact that we were simultaneously researching how reflective practice is supported in our teacher education programs made the self-study richer and more meaningful as connections were made between the findings of our self-study and those of our other research projects with students and colleagues. For example, in 2013 we coordinated a symposium with several other well-known researchers on the topic of reflection in teacher education (Correa Molina & Thomas, 2013) and in 2016 we examined the documentation in our respective teacher education programs to determine exactly what we ask of students that we believe will lead them to integrate reflection into their regular practice as novice teachers (Correa Molina & Thomas, 2016). We have also interviewed practicum supervisors to learn more about how they see their role in supporting the development of reflective practice in student teachers (Thomas & Correa Molina, 2018). In all these studies, we began with certain presumptions about the nature of reflection and its place in teacher preparation that we did not think to examine more closely until we embarked on this research.

This self-study took place in a large, research-based university in Canada, where teacher education is offered primarily as a four-year undergraduate degree. Student teachers take part in a teaching practicum during each of the four years, and various assignments are given to promote the development of a reflective stance during the practicum, such as journal writing and portfolios. Despite the unanimous acceptance of the importance of reflection for responsive and effective teaching (Collin, et al., 2013; Cornish & Jenkins, 2012; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014), we have, in our programs, long sensed a general level of dissatisfaction around our requirements for reflection on the part of both students who have to produce reflective texts and practicum supervisors who have to evaluate those texts. This impression is supported by research we have undertaken. For

example, in a study led by Correa Molina and Gervais (2012) student participants indicated that they were tired of writing reflections in the different courses of their program. They admitted that sometimes they made up situations that they then described as being real experiences. That study highlighted the fact that reflections that are evaluated are always requested in written form. Students from the same study revealed that they would prefer to reflect orally rather than always having to submit written assignments. These findings led us to question what we really mean by reflection in program requirements and what we are really evaluating in our teacher education programs: reflective responses to practice or the capacity to write about them? Findings from a recent study (Thomas and Correa Molina 2018) indicate that practicum supervisors would like more guidance on how to encourage reflection among student teachers while they are on practicum, and on how to evaluate this capacity. The participating university-based practicum supervisors unanimously indicated that the terms used in teacher education, such as 'reflection', 'reflexivity' and 'reflective practice' were ambiguous, and they mentioned that they were often unsure of how to give helpful feedback on reflective writing and how to evaluate the students' texts. With all of these questions and uncertainties in mind, we initially decided to take a closer look at what we ourselves understand by the above-mentioned terms and secondly to examine how the concepts were being taught and nurtured in our classes. The intention of this collaborative self-study is to more fully understand through dialogue, journaling, and discussion what we as teacher educators know and believe about reflection and reflective practice and how we can bring our students to a deeper understanding of these terms in order to be able to benefit from adopting a reflective stance in their teaching.

Contextual and Conceptual Framework

We work in a context where, since 2001, the Ministry of Education in Quebec has implemented a requirement of 12 competencies, which must be developed throughout the four years of university teacher education. One competency indicates that the future teacher must "engage in an individual and collective approach to professional development" and "conduct a rigorous reflexive analysis process on aspects of his or her teaching" (MEQ, 2001 p. 157). The practicum has become the privileged place for developing a reflective stance on one's teaching because the students are actively engaged in the act of teaching during that time.

The development of the capacity to reflect on one's practice and to demonstrate an understanding of the importance of reflection on learning to teach are therefore arguably universal in teacher education programmes (Beauchamp, 2012; Boud, 2010; Loughran, 2006). Much of the research on the development of reflection in teacher education began with Dewey (1933), in which he advocates for "…the formation of wide-awake, careful, thorough habits of thinking" (p. 78). Schön (1983; 1987) has also been highly influential in promoting the notion of reflection in order to improve professional practice. However, despite this unanimous acceptance of the importance of reflexivity for responsive and effective teaching (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012; Leitch & Day, 2000; Liston & Zeichner, 1991), there is considerable research that questions whether student teachers do develop as reflective practitioners as the result of their teacher education programmes (Collin, et al., 2013; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). In fact, it has been proposed that they may even be turned off by the endless requirements to reflect and write about their reflections (Russell, 2013). Following the work of Correa Molina and Chaubet (2019), we wonder if the internship experiences, which are at the heart of our teacher education, allow future teachers to achieve the level of reflective analysis that the ministry recommends and that will be helpful in their future practice. Other teacher educators have posed similar questions and self-study researchers such as Freese (2006) and Brandenburg (2008) enquire into how to support their student teachers' learning to adopt a reflective stance while on practicum. Our self-study fits into this tradition of questioning our assumptions and beliefs about our practices and is intended to provide a framework for our learning that we will eventually be able to use to improve our programs. As Vanassche and Kelchtermans (2015) have stated, self-study researchers are "teacher educators aimed at making explicit and questioning their tacit knowledge of practice through systematic investigation of their practices" (pp. 508-509).

The Concept of Reflection: Some Landmarks

Although widely used in initial teacher education, due to its polysemy, the concept of reflection is not so easy to define. Indeed, several studies (Beauchamp, 2006; Beauchamp and Thomas 2010, Saussez and Allal, 2007) have shown that reflection can be understood in many ways. Also, it is important to point out that although Schön's work has put in the foreground the concepts of reflection in and on action which value the knowledge constructed in practice, they do not equip teachers to make a systematic analysis of his or her practice (Altet, 1996).

Following the work of Dewey and Schön and other authors who have carried out work on the concept of reflective practice (Chaubet, 2010; Collin, 2009; Correa Molina and Gervais, 2012; Tardif, 2012), we share the vision of a reflexive practitioner as someone capable of reflecting on his or her actions, on his or her experiences and of drawing conclusions capable of bringing him or her either to confirm the merits of this action or to modify it; that is, someone capable of stepping back, allowing the individual to analyze the situation, examine it critically from a variety of angles, and to learn from it, both at the cognitive and emotional level.

Objectives

The study is centered around discussions of our own understandings of reflection and our beliefs about why it is an important ability to cultivate as a teacher. Using LaBoskey (2004) and Samaras (2011) as guides, we structured our study to be both exploratory and improvement-aimed (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 844). We decided to delve deeper into our personal relationships with the concept of reflection in order to become stronger and more transparent about what we wanted our students to learn in order to be able to reflect on their practice. We turned to self-study to examine our beliefs and understandings because it allowed us to deconstruct taken-for-granted meanings and restructure our definitions in theoretical ways that could be applied to the practical (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Our research questions became:

1. What do we really understand by “reflection” in terms of our own professional experiences and how we choose to carry out our practice?
2. How do our personal beliefs and understandings of reflection affect how we promote this approach in our teacher education programs and what we ask our students to do in order to try to develop the ability to reflect?
3. In what way can a deeper and more profound personal understanding of reflection in ourselves help us improve the way we support the development of reflection practice in our student teachers?

Methodology

Data collection methods for this collaborative self-study include taped transcripts of discussions as well as personal journal entries by each participant. In these journals, we recorded thoughts and experiences related to our study, but also gave ourselves the task of defining and redefining our personal understanding of the key-word “reflection” and “reflective practice”, often returning to the analysis and findings of our previous studies to check for consistencies and clarity. We regularly exchanged our journals, and our comments on each other’s definitions and examples provided the starting place for the next round of discussions, which took place at irregular intervals. Sometimes the conversation would turn to this topic when we were meeting about other aspects of our work as teacher educators, so not all the conversations were taped. In those cases, we tried to note down the main ideas of our exchanges afterward. Connecting our definitions to specific professional (and sometimes personal) examples was helpful in providing concrete focal points for clarification and exploration of ideas when discussing such an abstract term as “reflection.”

The language of our discussions was an important element of the study because we both work in our second language, and neither of us is fluent in each other’s first language. Discussing somewhat nebulous abstract terms in a second language is both challenging but also enlightening because there are terms and expressions from our first languages that we could bring

into the conversations to show a different point of view or another way of looking at an abstract concept. In this sense and by way of illustration, during one of our conversations, we invited each other to share what the word "reflection", in our mother tongue, evoked in our mind. Examples of these exchanges can be found in the findings section of this paper.

Data Analysis

We used an iterative approach to data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), reading and rereading our transcripts and journal entries and challenging each other's definitions by demanding clarity and more detailed examples. The data rapidly became layered and complex as we incorporated findings from our parallel research projects where we were examining the requirements for learning to reflect in our teacher education programs from multiple perspectives, including those of our students and colleagues.

Trustworthiness

Hamilton and Pinnegar (2015) remind us that "researchers make themselves publicly vulnerable to questions about the viability of the practice, the evidentiary and interpretative basis of the assertions for action, and the understandings revealed in the study of the selected practice" (p. 182). Mena and Russell (2017) examined papers submitted to the 2014 Castle conference for evidence of trustworthiness, as well as collaboration and multiple methods, and determine that the most common means for establishing trustworthiness include triangulation of data collection methods and working with critical friends. We employed triangulation with the data from this study as we examined the transcripts of our exchanges, journal entries, and the interview data from the previous study mentioned above. Our collaborative approach allowed us to integrate a critical friend stance as we examined each other's written perspectives and the transcripts of our discussions on reflection and reflective practice.

Findings

Three questions were at the heart of our self-study and in the following section, we will discuss the responses to these questions. The first question elicited a great deal of discussion: What do we really understand by the term "reflection" in terms of our own professional experiences and how we choose to carry out our practice?

We had several exchanges about the word "reflection" and what it means in our own practices as teacher educators as well as in our own first languages. Here are some examples of our exchanges on this subject taken from taped transcripts:

> *Lynn: What does the word reflection mean to you when you think about it in your language, in Spanish?*
>
> *Enrique: Hmmm, you see, with my training as a biologist, depending on the context, this word leads me either to a process of a physical nature, or to one of a psychological nature. I tell you that, and at the same time I think the two are linked. From the point of view of the physical phenomenon, when a ray of light crosses a prism, it decomposes and comes out transformed, revealing itself in a set of multicolored rays. I tell myself that in the sameway, from a psychological point of view, when you think of an action taken, a past situation or lived experience (the equivalent of the ray of light) and that you reflect on all that, the process that takes place in your interior is like the prism which would allow to observe, to analyze, to decompose the action, the situation or the experience so that it reveals what, before the process of reflection, was hidden.*

Also, the word reflection (reflexión in Spanish) is associated with the word "reflejo" that in Spanish can, depending on the context, be used to speak of the reflection (reflejo) of a mountain in the waters of the lake which is at foot of the same, and also of the reflex (reflejo) which consists in the involuntary or unconscious motor response which is triggered for any stimulation. Sometimes we will even use the word "reflejo" to speak of a habit like, for example, when we say, at the end of each day I have the reflex to reflect on what happened in my class.

> *Lynn: that's really interesting because in English, these are two different words. The verb "to reflect" is what we say of a mirror or when we see a reflection of a landscape in the water. Our reflexes are the sensori-motor responses to stimulation, and to me that is quite a different thing. I really do think that our underlying assumptions about the meanings of words, which are often based on the definitions these words have in our first language, have an impact on the way we use the words. We also assume that others will make the same connections that we do, whereas in this case, I would not connect the word "reflex" to "reflection" in the way you just have. I see this as yet another example of how teacher education is full of assumptions that we must clarify and address. Brookfield (1995) writes that we need to "hunt down" our assumptions in teacher education and make them explicit as otherwise these assumptions can obscure our intentions. The assumptions we have about the meanings of the words we use in education programs are hugely important because we can see how easy it is to misunderstand or partially understand each other. It's really quite amazing that we have not stopped to do this kind of close examination of the language we use before, particularly with a complex notion such as reflection.*
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> *Enrique: and for you, Lynn, what does the word reflection mean to you when you think about it in your language, in English?*
>
> *Lynn: well, as I mentioned above, a reflection is an image of something that is projected back from a surface like a mirror or calm water. We see the image, but not the real thing when we look at a reflection, which is "flipped around" and may also be distorted. When we reflect, we are searching to reproduce an image of a person, a thing or an event in our minds so that we can see it again, perhaps from a different angle or flipped around. We somehow have this idea that being able to reproduce images of past events related to teaching in our minds, and then writing about them, will automatically help new teachers improve their practice.*
>
> *Enrique: Yes, that's right and it doesn't necessarily work like that with our students. Of course, sometimes they will reflect on a situation they experienced during their internships, but that does not mean that it will lead them to question their actions and try to change their actions in the future. They will reflect in the sense of "reflejar", thinking about an action without, however, being able to modify what it is founded on (beliefs, vision, lived experience, etc.). Will this type of "reflection" give them tools to help them improve their professional practice as claimed in our guidelines? Quite a question, isn't it?*

Through conversations such as theses, our study has shown us how even fluent speakers can introduce ambiguity and a lack of clear intentions in our work as teacher educators through the assumptions we have about the meanings behind the words that we use.

Our second question asks: How do our personal beliefs and understandings of reflection and reflective practice affect how we promote this approach in our own classes and what we ask our students to do in order to try to develop the ability to reflect?

In an article entitled 'Has reflective practice done more harm than good in teacher education?' Tom Russell (2013) asks, "What evidence do we have that frequent references to reflection are improving the quality of the teachers we prepare for certification and careers in teaching?" (p. 80). Through our journaling and discussions, we realized that we have automatically assumed that learning to reflect is a crucial step in learning to become a good teacher and that completing a lot of assignments that include the word "reflection" is a good way to support that learning in student teachers. As Lynn wrote,

> *When I look at my approach to teaching reflective thinking about practice, I see that I use "the more the better" approach. If students struggle with expressing themselves "reflectively", I just assume that they need more practice at it and make them do more of it. (Personal journal entry, 2018-03-17)*

Russell (2013) goes on to remind us of the importance of making the term reflection clear to students, and to link reflection clearly and directly to professional learning as well as to empirical evidence of what works in teaching (p. 87).

Through this self-study, we have now determined that our previous beliefs that the meaning of reflection was self-evident have not served our students well. We are now considering how we can provide our students with a clearer sense of what we mean by asking them to reflect on their practice, and also how this action will help them improve their teaching.

The third question in our study was designed to help us conceive of ways to reinvest our learning from this study in order to move forward and improve our teaching: In what way can a deeper and more profound personal understanding of reflection in ourselves help us improve the way we support the development of a reflective stance in our student teachers?

Having a clearer sense of the different possible ways to interpret reflection has been very helpful in beginning to critically review the requirements of our programs. Through our journaling and exchanges on the subject, we have concluded that our programs rely on preconceived models of reflection that, even if they have the advantage of orienting this process and giving it a certain structure, they do not always correspond to the personal nature of the reflection. We have come to realize that we need to offer a variety of ways for students to show that they are thoughtful and can learn from past experiences. For example, Lynn now allows her students to submit recorded oral reflections instead of insisting on written compositions. We have also understood the importance of helping practicum supervisors understand that reflection can be discussed in broader and more creative ways than simply following a formula. Yes, it is simpler to evaluate texts that are somewhat uniform, but the cost comes when students feel they need to invent incidents in order to have something to write about.

Our findings in this self-study are both deeply personal and strongly connected to the improvement of our practices as teacher educators. On a personal note, we have each come to a much clearer sense of what it means to reflect and to live one's life as a reflective person. We both agree that our definitions of reflection for ourselves and our own ways of being in the world are much more transparent than when we began the study, and we each have a more complex perspective on what motivates us to live and act in certain ways, both personally and professionally. Some of our discussions led to exchanges on how constantly focussing on reflection is not always a positive thing, and that there are definite pitfalls to adopting this stance. For example, it is possible to reflect in unconstructive ways, that is ways that will not lead to positive changes or even reinforce negative ways of thinking and doing. Students who agonise endlessly over mistakes that they have made will not necessarily benefit from reflecting on a day when everything went wrong. It is also possible that the act of reflection has very little impact on practice. We may think about what we might do to improve but there are too many barriers and restrictions that keep us from making these changes. We tend to fall into the trap of insisting that others, namely our students, reflect and share their reflections in very specific and restrictive ways, meaning that they may fail to see the benefits of this practice. We confirmed that conversation is crucial to learning to reflect, and that simply writing down one's reflections, without the next steps of discussing, explaining and defending them to a trusted colleague is only the beginning of a truly satisfying reflective process. The notion of security is also important, as the work of Correa Molina and Gervais (2012) has shown because students need to feel free to express themselves without being judged or receiving possible recriminations. They need to believe that the person who will read or listen to their reflections truly cares about what they have to say and is interested in supporting their learning.

These findings have clear applications to ways that we can improve how we support and nurture the development of reflexivity in our students, particularly in terms of what we truly mean when we ask them to reflect on their learning in order to improve on their practice.

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