



REFLECTIVE PRACTICES: A MEANS TO TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Reflective practice is a process that facilitates teaching, learning and understanding, and it plays a central role in teachers' professional development. When student teachers carry out systematic enquiry into themselves, they understand themselves, their practices and their students. By constantly looking into their own actions and experiences, they professionally grow in their own. In this study, the researchers conducted a qualitative research to see the effectiveness of reflective practices in the development of student teachers. The study examines how the teacher educator created opportunities for student teachers to develop their reflective practices during their practice teaching sessions. The paper attempts to establish that reflective practice is a tool for student teachers to explore themselves and thereby leading to their professional development.

Keywords: Reflective Practices, Reflective Teaching, Student Teachers, Teacher Development

1. Introduction

Teachers are the greatest assets of any education system. They stand in the interface of the transmission of knowledge, skills and values. Teacher education plays a vital role in reforming and strengthening the education system of any country. Training of teachers has emerging global trends in education and the overall needs and aspirations of the people. The Quality of education depends on the quality teachers and teaching. The way teachers are trained is an important aspect to improve quality.

Reflective practice has become a focus of interest and a powerful movement in teacher education. The complexity of teaching requires teachers to question their practices for their own professional development in order to improve and to increase learner performance. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on an action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning. A key rationale for reflective practice is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; deliberate reflection on experience is essential.

Reflective practice is an important tool in practice-based professional learning settings where people learn from their own professional experiences, rather than from formal learning or knowledge transfer. It is the most important source of personal professional development and improvement. It is also an important way to bring together theory and practice; through reflection a person is able to see and label forms of thought and theory within the context of his

or her work. A person who reflects throughout his or her practice is not just looking back on past actions and events, but is taking a conscious look at emotions, experiences, actions, and responses, and using that information to add to his or her existing knowledge base and reach a higher level of understanding.

Reflection, in the words of a layman, "... simply means thinking about something," but for some, "it is a well-defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action" (Loughran, 2002). Reflective teaching, at a very general level involves 'thinking about one's teaching'. Reflective teaching is a process where teachers think over their teaching practices, analyze how something was taught and how the practice might be improved or changed for better learning outcomes. Some points of consideration in the reflection process might be what is currently being done, why it's being done and how well students are learning. By collecting information about what goes on in their classroom, and by analyzing and evaluating this information, they identify and explore their own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in their teaching. Reflective teaching is a beneficial process in teacher professional development, both for pre-service and in-service teachers. Ur (1999) says that the first and most important basis for professional progress is simply the teachers' own reflection on daily classroom events. So, she gives emphasis to personal progress through reflecting on one's own activities and practices that happened in the class and thinking.

2. The role of reflective teaching in teacher education

Reflective practice is used at both the pre-service and in-service levels of teaching. Coaching and peer involvement are two aspects of reflective practices seen most often at the pre-service level. In a 1993 study on how student teachers develop the skills necessary for reflective teaching during their field experiences, Ojanen explores the role of the teacher educator as a coach. Teacher educators can most effectively coach student teachers in reflective practice by using students' personal histories, dialogue journals, and small and large-group discussions about their experiences to help students reflect upon and improve their practices. Kettle and Sellars (1996) studied the development of third-year teaching students. They analyzed the students' reflective writings and interviewed them extensively about their reflective practices. They found that the use of peer reflective groups encouraged student teachers to challenge existing theories and their own preconceived views of teaching while modeling for them a collaborative style of professional development that would be useful throughout their teaching careers. Several research studies have proved that critical reflection upon experience continues to be an effective technique for professional development. Freidus (1997) describes a case study of one teacher/graduate student struggling to make sense of her beliefs and practices about what constitutes good teaching. Her initial pedagogy for teaching was based on the traditions and practices of direct teaching. Her traditional socialization into teaching made it difficult for her to understand that her views of good teaching were being challenged in her practice. Implementing reflective teaching technique in her classroom enabled her to acknowledge and validate what she was learning.

Schon (1993) suggested that reflective teaching practice is a continuous process and involves learner thoughtfully considering one's own experience in applying knowledge to practice while being taught by professionals. It helps the individual's to develop their own personality. Gibbs' (1988) reflective practice suggests that individuals develop analysis of feelings, evaluation of experience etc. Jasper (2003) associated reflective teaching practice with lifelong learning resulting in the development of autonomous, qualified and self-directed professionals. Engaging in reflective practice is associated with the improvement of the quality of care, stimulating personal and professional growth and closing the gap between theory and practice. Bartlett

(1990) points out that becoming a reflective teacher involves moving beyond a primary concern with instructional techniques and “how to” questions and asking “what” and “why” questions that regard instructions and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as part of broader educational purposes. Asking questions “what and why” gives certain power over individual’s teaching resulting in the emergence of autonomy and responsibility in the work of teachers. (Lieberman & Miller, 2000) pointed out that the practice of reflective teaching, reflective inquiry, and reflection-on practice, results in gaining of the personal and professional knowledge that is so important to being an effective teacher and in shaping children's learning. Han (1995) stated that, the process element of reflection emphasises how teachers make decisions, content stresses the substance that drives the thinking and reflective inquiry may set the stage for learning how to be a good teacher.

Reflective teaching is a significant element in student teachers’ initial training programme. It has also been widely acknowledged by many researchers as an approach that could promote teachers’ professional development and improves the quality of teaching and learning. Jacobs, Vakalisa and Gawe (2011) contend that reflective teaching offers teachers the opportunity to renew their practice and to understand the effects of their teaching. They further stated that reflective teaching provides information on how teachers connect with learners meaningfully thus promoting sound teaching and learning practice. Akbari (2007) suggests that reflective teaching will make teachers question clichés that they have learned during their formative years and will also enable them to develop more informed practice. Teachers will integrate the knowledge they have gained during pre-service training with their practical experiences and make informed choices based on the situations they find themselves in.

Student teachers need to question their practices and be open to different possibilities in their teaching experiences. Yang (2009) indicates that critical reflection does not come naturally to most teachers, therefore appropriate opportunities for reflection should be provided to student-teachers. This suggests that reflectivity is a skill that needs to be acquired by learning and not by automatic occurrence. Teacher educators should apply this theory in classroom practice, in order to observe and reflects on the results so that the classroom becomes a kind of laboratory where the teacher can relate teaching theory to teaching practice. By adopting reflective teaching practices, the teacher educator imparts inspiration among teacher trainees, so as to enable them to practice the same in their teaching practice sessions.

Research has been conducted on reflective teaching as an essential part in teachers’ professional development, (Griffiths 2000; Akbari 2007; Killen 2007; Conley et al., 2010; Jacobs, 2011). Little has been done to investigate student teachers’ reflective experiences during practice teaching. Griffiths (2000) argues that reflection is taken for granted rather than being made explicit. There is an assumption that student teachers will automatically reflect on their practices. This research study is a contribution on the discourse on reflective practice in an initial teacher education programme. It also aims at suggesting strategies that could assist student teachers to become reflective teachers.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative enquiry for the research and data were collected through a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The participants were 13 students enrolled for the two years B.Ed programme at St. Joseph’s College of Education, Mysuru, Karnataka, India and who had opted mathematics method as their option subject. The student teachers completed the questionnaire about their experience of reflection on the activities conducted in the mathematics classroom. The researchers conducted a qualitative analysis of

the responses of the questionnaire. Also, they analyzed the reflective journal maintained by each student.

4. Strategies to practice reflection

The findings of the research on reflective practices helped the researchers to identify different strategies that can be practised in the pre-service training programme. The first step towards the process of reflection is to gather information about what happens in the class followed by analysis of the data. Here are some different ways of doing this.

4.1 Reflective journal /diary

This is the easiest way to begin a process of reflection since it is purely personal. Student teachers encounter many issues in classroom settings. After each activity/ practice lesson, the student teacher has to write in a notebook about what happened. They can describe about own reactions and feelings and those things which happened during each sessions. Diary writing does require a certain discipline in taking the time to do it on a regular basis.

4.2 Collaborative learning

Brookfield (1995) maintains the importance of continual dialogue with peers about teaching in the mutually cooperative environment rather than a competitive one. Collaboration with peer members increases the probability that students teachers will be successfully reflective and more confident in their professional development. While discussing their experience with their peers, they can describe their own experiences and check, reframe and broaden their own theories of practice.

4.3 Recording Lessons

Video or audio recordings of lessons can provide very useful information for reflection. Through watching their own or other peer members' audio and video recordings, student teachers can develop their awareness of teaching. A teacher may do many things in class but may not be aware of many things happening in the class which the teacher may not normally see. A classroom video can vividly picture the whole process of teaching. It can trigger teachers' reflective thinking, reflect on their weaknesses and help them get some inspiration and ideas for their teaching improvement.

The recording can be audio or video.

➤ Audio recordings can be useful for considering aspects of teacher talk

✚ How much do you talk?

✚ About what ?

✚ Are instructions and explanations clear?

✚ How much time do you allocate to student talk?

✚ How do you respond to student talk?

➤ Video recordings can be useful in showing the aspects of teacher's own behaviour.

✚ Where do you stand?

✚ Who do you speak to?

✚ How do you approach the students?

4.4 Teacher Educator's Feedback

The feedback from the teacher educator can help the student teacher to reflect upon their lesson or any activity conducted in the institution.

4.5 Peer Observation

Observation is the most basic research technique that student teachers employ in classrooms. The student teacher invites a peer member to observe his/her class to collect information about the lesson. This may be with a simple observation task or through note taking. The student teacher can ask their peer member to focus on which students contribute the most in the lesson, what different patterns of interaction occur and his/her performance. For observation to be viewed as a positive rather than a negative experience, the observer's function should be limited to that of gathering information. The observer should not be involved in evaluating a student teacher's lesson. Mutual observation of classes are really fruitful. Therefore, observation is a good way for their professional development.

4.6 Student Feedback

The student teacher can ask their students about what goes on in the classroom. Their opinions and perceptions can add a different and valuable perspective. This can be done with simple questionnaires.

4.7 Action Research

Action research is also a kind of reflective practices. It is a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by teachers to understand their practice and improve the way they address issues and solve problems. It helps student teachers to become aware of what's happening in the classroom by identifying common problems and hypothesising about possible causes and solutions and attempting to apply an action plan.

Once the student teacher has some information recorded about what goes on in their classroom, they must think, talk, read and ask about the information they have collected. They can identify the patterns occurring in their teaching through the observation. Then, he/she should find out the ways to overcome it. In this research study, the student teachers adopted all the strategies and reflected on their practices. The researchers could find a significant change in the behaviour of the student teachers.

Conclusion

The reflective practice is a cyclical process, because once we start to implement changes, then the reflective and evaluative cycle begins again. As a result of reflection, the teacher may decide to do something in a different way, or may just decide that what she/he has been doing is the best way. Therefore, being a teacher one needs to reflect on the experiences or activities one is doing for one's growth. In short, by developing knowledge and understanding the setting practice and the ability to identify and react to the problems the student teachers can become effective teachers. Teachers can deal with the needs and different issues of the learners and demand of time if they reflects on their daily teaching learning activities for their professional growth. To deal and survive in their professional field, the student teachers need to grow and bring changes in their behaviour and style. Reflection is a flash back that the teachers need to mediate for their development.

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