

Pre-service Teacher's Reflections of Lessons Taught during Practice Teaching

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ABSTRACT Practice teaching is an opportunity for pre-service teachers to put theory into practice and involves teaching lessons. During the course of their studies, pre-service teachers learn how to prepare and present lessons; manage a class and how to engage in teaching and learning activities. To become effective teachers, the novice teachers should evaluate whether the lessons that they have taught are achieving the desired outcomes. One of the ways of evaluating effectiveness of a lesson is for the practitioners to engage in critical reflection of the lessons. This paper examines how Bachelor of Education and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students reflect on lessons that they have taught during practice teaching and the importance of critical reflection in developing an effective teacher. Data was gathered from pre-service teachers using a questionnaire and was analysed and discussed using a thematic approach. Students were required to reflect on their lessons using the following themes: preparation and presentation of lessons. Analysis of the data, indicated that students were confident regarding preparation and presentation of lessons and possess the necessary skills in dealing with learners.

INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice (Loughran 2002; Schon 1983; Zeichner and Liston 1996) is one promising approach that contributes to the growth of pedagogical content knowledge in practicing teachers and occurs best by guided reflection (Sifers 2012). Reflective practice, in its many forms, has become an important part of in-service teacher education because of its emphasis on developing teachers' ability to make informed pedagogical decisions. Critical reflection based on trustworthy evidence is an integral part of a variety of professional development strategies, including action research, teacher inquiry, lesson study and professional learning communities (Loucks-Horsel et al. 2003). The type of reflection and reasoning in pedagogy included in these strategies have found their way into national standards for science teaching and teacher education in the United States of America (American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAA), 1993; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards 2006; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) 2001; National Research Council (NRC) 1996). "The ability to think about what one does and why- assessing past actions, current situations, and intended outcomes- is vital to intelligent practice, practice that is reflective rather than routine. As the time in the teaching pro-

cess when teachers stop to think about their work and make sense with it, reflection influences how one grows as a professional by influencing how successfully one is able to learn from one's experiences" (Richert 1990: 514).

Post-lesson critical reflection is an important method in developing reflective capacity. Reflecting on what went well and what did not helps in improving how a lesson is planned and taught and improve teaching ideology (Alfaro and Quezada 2010), but is a difficult process (Robertson 2013). Critical reflection is much more than simply recounting events in a lesson. According to Brookfield, in King and Hibbison (2000) and Davies et al. (2014), critical reflection is important for the following reasons; examines one's assumptions and beliefs about how the world should work; it increases the probability that teachers will take more informed actions- those that can be explained and justified to self and others; to enable teachers to provide a rationale behind their practice which can be crucial in establishing credibility with students; to avoid self-laceration- believing that the teacher is to blame if students are not learning; to ground teachers emotionally; to enliven the classroom by making it challenging, interesting and stimulating for students and to increase trust as a result of examples and modelling conveyed by the teacher, thereby allowing students to learn democratic behaviour and a moral tone. To be-

come successful in critical reflection, Brookfield (1995: 21) asserts that the teacher must use four critical reflective lenses:

1. The teachers unique autobiography as a teacher and learner, using personal self-reflection and collecting the insights and meanings for teaching;
2. Making an assessment of one's self through the students' lenses by seeking their input and seeing classrooms and learning from their perspectives;
3. By peer review of teaching from a colleague's experiences, observations and feedback;
4. By frequently referring to the theoretical literature that may provide an alternative framework.

The key elements of reflective practice are: a deliberate pause, a purposeful slowing down, to allow for higher-level thinking processes, an open-minded stance, recognizing there are many ways to view a particular circumstance, situation, or event, a receptiveness to changing viewpoint and letting go of needing to be right, a mindful state, being conscious of both thought and action and an acknowledgment that doubt, perplexity, and tentativeness are part of the process (Larrivee 2006)

Reflective teaching is a means of looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you did it, and if it worked: a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in our classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, teachers identify and explore their own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in their teaching (Tice 2004).

The greatest reward of becoming a reflective practitioner according to Qatar University, Office of the Faculty of Instructional Development is that you (the teacher) becomes aware of how insightful and capable your students are. Teaching becomes a positive and rewarding experience from which you learn every day. (http://www.qu.edu.qa/offices/ofid/educational_materials_e/The_Role_of_Reflection_in_Teaching.pdf).

Research Question

How do pre-service teachers reflect on lessons that they have taught during practice teaching?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An investigation exercise was conducted to get pre-service teachers to reflect on lessons that they taught during teaching practice using a qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview was used as a research instrument to collect data from Bachelor of Education and Postgraduate Certificate in Education, students at a South African university. An interview schedule was constructed in such a way that it was in line with the objectives of the research. Creswell (2008) alludes to the fact that researchers use semi-structured interviews in order to gain a detailed picture of a respondent's particular topic. The method gave the researcher and the respondent much more flexibility than the conventional structured interview. Permission was obtained from the pre-service teachers themselves to use the data. Anonymity was assured by not using names of any of the student teachers or associating any student with actual responses used in this paper.

Sampling

The population for the study consisted of 152 Bachelor of Education and Postgraduate Certificate students. Purposive sampling was utilised to obtain a sample of 15 respondents, consisting of 3 first year, three second year, three third year and three fourth year Bachelor of Education students and three Postgraduate Certificates in Education students.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted with the selected students, immediately after they had taught the lesson that was assessed by the researcher. The duration of the interview was approximately 30 minutes. The pre-service teachers were required to reflect on the preparation and presentation of their lessons.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were returned to verify authenticity and make changes if necessary. All the respondents verified the transcripts as being a true reflection of how they responded to the interview questions. The reviewed transcripts were analyzed using a thematic approach. The

respondent's responses were analysed in conjunction with the assessment report of the student. For ethical reasons, no aspect of the assessment report will be used or quoted in this paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Since the interview with pre-service teachers on reflections took place immediately after they were assessed on the lesson that they had taught and the assessment reports on the lesson were written by the researcher, the researcher was able to draw parallels from the assessment report and the reflections of the respondents on preparation and presentation of lessons. The reflections on both these aspects were consistent with the researcher's comments on the assessment. The majority of students indicated that they had spent between 3 to 4 hours preparing for the 30 minute lesson that they had taught. They had spent the majority of the preparation time on aspects such as researching the topic, finding and preparing suitable resource materials for the presenting of the lesson, identifying activities for learners, planning and preparing group work activities, assessment exercises, how to cater for different ability levels within a class. Typical responses on reflection on preparation read as follows:

"I was prepared as I made lesson plans therefore I taught the learners according to the lesson planned. Also I had the resources as to give my students a clear understanding of what was being taught to them."

"I prepare starting on the weekend, then finalise everything on a Tuesday. I go everything in my head before I give the lesson."

(These students did part of their practice teaching on 12 consecutive Wednesdays in the first semester)

"I prepared by finding pictures to guide my lesson plan and make it more interesting. Looked up information to make sure that the information I'm giving them (referring to learners) is correct and accurate. Looked into different websites to come up with ideas for activities and worksheets."

These comments or reflections are an indication that pre-service teachers take practice teaching and the preparation of lesson seriously. In their preparation they did not rely solely on the text books that were being used at the

school or the materials that their host teachers use, but took the initiative to obtain more information, materials and activities that was required of them. They were, therefore, able to successfully attain the intended outcomes of the lessons that they had taught. These teachers presented their lessons with a great deal of self-confidence and were able to successfully link the theory that they had learnt at university with practice. Their subject and pedagogic content knowledge (in the opinion of the researcher) was sound. This was evident from the oral and written responses of learners to assessment exercises given to them.

Students were candid in their reflections about preparations as captured by the following comments:

"...however for my second two lessons I did not feel prepared as the content of my lessons was only made available the day before (I taught the lesson). I needed more time."

"My file could be more ahead, but it is the first week and we have other assignments on our mind"

These reflections indicate that mentor teachers need to be more considerate and timeous in allocating lessons to students so that they can prepare thoroughly for their lessons. Often pre-service teachers are teaching a particular topic for the first time and they need ample time to do the preparation to teach successful lessons. University lecturers need to ensure that due dates for assignments do not fall within the practice teaching time frames, as having to complete assignments and prepare a first time lesson can place unnecessary stress and burden to the pre-service teacher and compromise the quality of the lesson taught to learners. This oversight on the part of lecturers ultimately affects learners.

All of the respondents indicated that they did not experience any difficulties regarding the preparation of lessons. This suggests that they were grounded in the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of lesson preparation hence they were able to make the connections between theory and practice, collect the materials that they needed for the presentation of their lessons and use technology in preparation of lessons.

The nature of reflective comments made on preparations, although valuable lacked depth. This depth, which is required in good reflective teaching, according to Zeichner and Liston (1996), is attained when the practitioner reflects

on the goals, values and assumptions that guide their work as well as examining the context in which they taught, and asking critical questions about the end and means of teaching. Lack of depth in reflection can be attributed to their inexperience as practitioners. According to Brookfield in King and Hibbison (2000) "there is a culture of silence in most institutions that train teachers". Teachers are bound in chains of silence about the process and meaning of teaching, and very rarely will you find them talking about their teaching in a sustained or serious way. Richart (1992: 52) indicates that "teachers aren't heard because they don't speak. And they don't speak because they are part of a culture that silences them by a set of oppressive mechanisms such as overwork, low status and an externally defined standard of performance." Brookfield, in King and Hibbison (2000: 153) "asserts that living in silence reinforces a demoralising sense of isolation that snaps any inclination that teachers may have to raise critical questions. Teachers are aware that asking critical questions could result in being excluded from all kinds of networks and conversations. As a result of being aware that being critical can cause teachers to be isolated, teachers perform self-censorship and this causes others to also remain servile. This according to many reports cited by Brookfield (1995) and others, unfortunately, seems to be an accurate description of the current state of affairs in some higher education academic institutions. Thus those professionals that currently practice reflective processes are indeed courageous and could be considered as rebels.

It is therefore not surprising that the reflections by the respondents on the presentation in this sample of pre-service teachers were descriptive in nature. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, were reflections relating to:

Introduction to Lessons

The following are some of the descriptive comments of the respondents regarding introduction of their lesson presentations:

"I have used different ways to introduce my lesson each week. I have also used power point presentations, so that the class could follow as I spoke."

"My lesson was introduced with a short story. We discussed different feelings and linked it with own experiences (of learners)."

"In the classroom I feel free to introduce my lesson because my learners can't wait to listen to what I am going to teach them and with an interest of getting involved."

Students have placed importance on the introduction of their lessons. The introduction of a lesson, if interesting or fascinating, helps generate interest in the lesson and motivates learners to pay careful attention to the rest of the lesson. It creates an expectation in learners that the rest of the lessons will be just as interesting. It also creates the tone for the rest of the lesson.

Professionalism

Teacher training programmes place emphasis on teacher professionalism. Teacher trainees, thus view professionalism in a serious light. The reflections that follow are evidence of this:

"Professional and approachable. I feel prepared to be a professional teacher and have my own class."

"I always try to be professional when I am at school. This is due to the fact that I think that learners see how I act and are always aware of weaknesses. I dress professionally and try to keep a professional relationship with the teachers I work with and also with the learners."

Shortcomings of the Lesson

Only two of the fifteen students reflected on the shortcomings of their lessons. The response of one of the student was that:

"I have not found any difficulty in presenting my lessons, other than that I always run out of time."

The second response on shortcomings was:

"I always fail to present when there is another teacher in my class, except for my host teacher and I always freeze or get stuck on the first few seconds of my lesson."

Critical reflections on teaching by pre-service teachers have been very helpful to lecturers as it assists in: devising ways to assist students who experience difficulties, helps motivate students, improve study materials, identify gaps in content and pedagogical knowledge and answer critical questions that students may have.

Once again reflection lacked depth as no mention was made of issues of methodology, learner' activities, classroom and time manage-

ment, assessment activities or overall success of lessons. This indicates that the student teachers' confidence levels regarding the above mentioned aspects were high. This was consistent with the observations made by the researcher while assessing the respondents teaching of the lesson.

CONCLUSION

A lack of depth in reflective practice of student teachers is an indication that there is a culture of silence in institutions that train teachers. The culture of silence needs to be changed into communicative and interactive one, allowing students the opportunity to voice their opinions, get constructive responses and feedback on their reflections thereby improving the quality of the lessons that they teach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students need to be made aware of their rights and the recourse that they have, if they experience victimisation as a result of being critical reflective practitioners. This can be enforced by including modules on educational legislation in the undergraduate teacher training programmes. Reflective practices need to be inculcated in student teachers during their teacher training in order for them to use these practices thereby improving their teaching.

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