

Engaging with reflection: the experience of trainee teachers and teacher educators in post-compulsory education. (0079)

Reflection in teacher education.

The work of Schön (1983, 1987) has contributed to the widespread use of reflection to develop professional practice across fields such as education, nursing and social work. The role of reflection and the model of the teacher as 'reflective practitioner' have become accepted by researchers within education over the last two decades (Hatton & Smith, 1995; LSDA, 2003; Tummons, 2007). The prevailing view is that reflection benefits practice, therefore trainee teachers are encouraged to reflect in order to develop their practice (LSDA, 2003; Bolton, 2005). However the literature offers differing views of reflection leading some researchers to question the use of the concept (Griffiths & Tann, 1992; Ixer, 1999; Rodgers, 2002; LSDA, 2003). Theoretical models suggest that reflection can be conceptualised as a process of making sense of experience, drawing on personal interpretations, often supplemented by the views of others, to construct understandings which inform future action (Kelly, 1966; Boud et al 1985; Kolb, 1984).

The image of the teacher as engaged in an active constructive process of reflection drawing on assumptions about practice and using theory as a basis to reflect on practice may be the most widely accepted concept of reflective practice (Morrison, 1995). However this may not be the form of reflection most commonly adopted by trainee teachers, whose initial interests tend to lie with refining their practical skills (Ward and McCotter, 2004). Furthermore evidence of individual differences in engagement with reflection (Boud et al, 1985; Reiman, 1999; Manouchehri, 2002; Giovannelli, 2003; Griffin, 2003) mean that we cannot assume that reflection happens automatically for all individuals, or that they will all use reflection in such a way as to improve performance (Reiman, 1999; Moon, 2004). These findings suggest that what trainee teachers may be doing and experiencing may vary considerably (Day, 1993; Bolton, 2005). This needs to be considered by teacher educators in supporting trainees' use of reflection, since there is unlikely to be 'one best way' to apply to all individuals at all times so trainees may need to be offered a variety of techniques to support their use of reflection (Adler, 1991).

Teacher education courses commonly require students to keep a log or journal (Griffiths and Tann, 1992; Loughran, 1996; Mueller, 2003). Journals provide a valuable opportunity to review and evaluate experience and enable trainees to look back over their experience to see how their practice and their thinking have developed over time (van Halen-Faber, 1997; Bain et al, 2002). However the literature does indicate that some students experience difficulty with journal writing (Sumsion, 2000; Mueller, 2003). Journal writing represents an individual and

personal approach to reflection which may not enable individuals to achieve the quality of reflection required to develop as reflective practitioners, as some claim reflection is more effective when conducted through discussion with others, (Brockbank and McGill, 1998; Bolton, 2005).

Researching trainee teachers' experience of reflection.

As a teacher educator within post-compulsory education I encountered individuals who did not readily engage with the reflective process. This paper presents findings from a study of trainee teachers to gain an understanding of why some individuals experience difficulty with course components requiring reflection. The aim was to provide insights into the most effective strategies to support the trainees' development as reflective practitioners, both during the course and into their future practice.

127 trainees on Cert Ed. and PGCE programmes for post-compulsory education completed a questionnaire about their experience of reflection. The questionnaires provided general information about their experience, both of reflection and keeping a reflective journal. On the basis of their questionnaire responses a purposive sample of 15 individuals was selected for interview about their experience of reflection.

Findings

The questionnaire responses indicate that the majority of trainees have a clear understanding of reflection, seeing it as having a valuable role in developing their practice. Some do consider wider issues in their reflection, although the majority are not looking beyond their own practice, in accordance with findings such as Ward and McCotter (2004). Most express agreement that keeping a journal supports their reflection, although a substantial minority are prepared to admit to difficulties with journal writing, suggesting that they might find alternative techniques, such as peer or mentor discussion (McMahon, 1997; Harrison et al, 2005) or online forums (Reiman, 1999; Hughes, 2005) more beneficial. The majority agreed talking to others helped them reflect.

The interviews show that trainees have a clear understanding of reflection and value its role in helping them to develop as teachers and improve their practice, in line with the findings of the LSDA study (2003). The interviews also show that individuals engage with reflection in different ways, while writing works to support reflection for some individuals, it does not suit all. Difficulties with journal writing are related to personal factors and the deeper issue of putting thoughts into words. The findings suggest that individuals' engagement with reflection varies along a personal-social dimension, with some individuals preferring to reflect on their own, with or without the use of a journal, while others engage in collaborative discussion, some preferring this to individual reflection. Preferences for personal and social engagement with reflection are discussed in relation to theoretical approaches to the personal and social construction of understandings of experience (Kelly, 1966; Berger and

Luckmann, 1966). Such preferences have implications for teacher education, suggesting the provision of a variety of techniques for engaging with reflection. This in turn raises questions about teacher educators' own experience and engagement with reflection, the theoretical models which teacher educators personally find most useful, and how they customarily engage in reflection, whether through personal introspection, keeping a journal, discussion with colleagues. Preliminary findings from a study of teacher educators indicate that the majority do not keep a personal reflective journal, although they require their trainees to do so. Findings also indicate the value for teacher educators of reflecting on their own practice to ensure the techniques they use are maximizing trainees' engagement with reflection, both during their training and beyond.

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