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Reflective Practice

There is an extensive body of literature relating to reflective practice, originating from a range of sources including education, psychology, nursing and sociology. However, reflection is a difficult concept to define (Bulman & Schutz, 2004) and there appears to be a lack of clarity among different authors and disciplines in their use of this terminology. A commonly accepted definition of reflection is that it is the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experience (present or past) in terms of self (self in relation to self and self in relation to the world). The outcome is a changed conceptual perspective (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 101). Johns (2004) presented a more holistic description (rather than definition) of reflection that incorporates both deliberate and intuitive learning and that can take place either within or outside of classroom instruction:

Reflection is being mindful of self, either within or after an experience, as if a window through which the practitioner can view and focus self within the context of a particular experience, in order to confront, understand and move toward resolving contradiction between one's vision and actual practice. Through the conflict of contradiction, the commitment to realize one's vision and understanding why things are as they are, the teacher practitioner can gain new insights into self and be empowered to respond more congruently in future situations within a reflexive spiral towards developing practical wisdom and realizing one's vision as a lived reality. The teacher practitioner may require guidance to overcome resistance or be empowered to act on understanding (Johns, 2004, p. 3).

Reflective practice is a term that can be viewed from numerous perspectives. For some, it simply means thinking about something; for others it is a well-defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action (Loughran, 2002). Below are some of the key tenets

of reflection or “knowing-in-action” to inform teacher practice and performance (Schön, 1987).

They are:

- Reflection is widely used as a teaching, learning and assessment strategy within professional education (Darling-Hammond, Wei & Andree, 2010).
- Reflection is advocated to promote experiential learning during practice placements and the integration of theory and practice (Loughran, 2002).
- Reflection is thought to promote problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making skills (Schön, 1987).
- Reflective practice was heavily influenced by Donald Schön who believed that not only researchers generate professional knowledge but educational practitioners, as well.
- The key cognitive skills necessary to underpin reflection include self-awareness, description, critical analysis and synthesis (Atkins, 2004).
- There is a range of approaches to reflection, and a number of models and frameworks are advocated to facilitate the process (Galea, 2005; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2014).

For this paper, the researcher will focus on the critical areas that are relevant to reflective practice: observation, learning through experience, and the value of reflection in order to improve teacher professional practice and performance.

Upon examination of reflective practice through the lens of observation, Lisle (2006) indicated that *reflective practice* in education is “learning in practice” (p. 118). Teachers learn a lot from their everyday work as teachers. When teachers are encouraged to think and act like reflective practitioners, they build capacities for learning, both their own capacities and those of their students. This occurs more frequently when a teacher’s practice in the classroom and her performance in the school help her to generate new knowledge. Both contemporary and postmodern authors who have undertaken research on reflective practice have agreed with its

capacity to transform teaching and students' learning processes (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Belvis, Pineda, Armengol, & Moreno, 2013). Teacher-education processes based on reflective practice explore the nature of teaching and learning through observation and then interpretation. As teachers participate in observation and in learning through beliefs, conceptions and reflection, they might come to an even better understanding of reflective practice by learning from experience.

Some of the most useful thinking about education can happen with teachers in the classroom. Effective reflective practice involves careful consideration of both "seeing" and "action" to enhance the possibilities of learning through experience (Loughran, 2002, p. 38). Isolating the two components (seeing and action), however, can be a cumbersome task. For example, it was common in the School of Education at my former university to have the teacher educator "extract" the learning from the student teacher's experience and present it back to the student. Even though this process seemed helpful and was an evaluative mechanism, it was not reflection. Loughran (2002) remarked that, if the focus is genuinely on the student teacher/practitioner as learner, then it is really her ability to analyze and to make meaning from her experience that matters most. This should occur from the learner/practitioner herself and not from the teacher educator's filtering, developing or sharing the knowledge. The teacher educator can, however, remind or encourage the learner/practitioner to reflect. The reflective practitioner comes to recognize and to better understand this subtle distinction (Loughran, 2002) and develops an appreciation for the value of reflection in teacher education. Reflection is a key element for determining the teacher's effectiveness and should take prominence in any teacher training program.

Given the importance of reflection to a teacher's growth and professional development, more emphasis should be placed on the value of reflecting before, during and after teacher training. Teacher education programs across America should all emphasize training their prospective teachers to be reflective practitioners (Peña & de Leon, 2011), even though adding this emphasis proves to be a complicated endeavor. But why is reflection so necessary? It is necessary because it is the point at which teachers make meaning of the events in their classrooms, and the point at which they begin to critically evaluate their performance and become ready to ask, "What went wrong?", "What went right?", and "How can I improve my lessons?" (Peña & de Leon, 2011, p. 126). Reflective practice is valuable as it encourages teachers to critically evaluate their own performance.

To conclude, systematic thinking has been one of the major tenets of teacher education for good reason, since it fosters the use of critical thinking in evaluating one's skills and learning from one's experience. It also involves the desire to gain the knowledge needed to continue to grow professionally (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2014). Therefore, it is important for teachers being trained and those who teach to be encouraged to reflect; this is just as important as learning about constructivism or problem-based learning or even educational assessment. Dewey (1933) points out that the ability to self-reflect is what drives teachers to continually seek to improve their practice. In contrast, teachers who are not reflective continue to do the same thing day after day or year after year without thinking about their own effectiveness as an instructor, and, therefore, never see the necessity of improving their craft as they progress in their careers. Critical teacher reflection is a necessary ingredient (Howard, 2003) for teacher professional development and success; therefore, it should not be a neglected consideration in the American curriculum.

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