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K–12 Teacher Reflective Practice in (Pandemic) Context

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Introduction

Elena and Paul are elementary school literacy coaches who support literacy curriculum and instruction in multiple school buildings within a large New Jersey school district. When COVID-19 broke, they worked together and with other educators to analyze their unique school and community context, identified potential learning gaps, and constructed a revised plan for remote instruction while mindful of these unique contexts. For example, Elena and Paul thought about their district's recent strides to support more phonics and word study as part of the district reading block, especially since ample district time and money had been dedicated to building teacher capacity to deliver a systematic and multisensory approach to phonics and word study. As a result of the pandemic, teachers and students found themselves home, without their resources such as blending boards, sand trays, and word sorts. This was clearly a problem, and Elena and Paul persevered to revise the district approach.

Elena discussed the issue with a cohort of Orton-Gillingham specialists, and Paul was in touch with an online regional literacy coaching group. Next came professional conversations between Elena, Paul, district teachers, and the district supervisor. Soon after all of this collaboration, Elena developed K–2 Zoom phonics videos that presented virtual lessons that prompted students to practice at home using computer-based book widgets. Paul developed a student-friendly digital interactive notebook to spur students to practice their study of district-driven spelling and vocabulary lists—integrating ideas from a word study

book club that he facilitated earlier in the school year.

Elena and Paul are exemplars for teacher reflective practice—a practice all the more important when a pandemic upended daily life and teaching practices—however, teacher reflective practice does not come naturally to everyone.

So, what is reflective practice, and how can teachers be supported in their practice of reflection effectively in today's ever-changing classroom contexts? A clear definition of teacher reflective practice could contribute to supporting teachers' capacity for learning and development as reflective practitioners in order to help prepare them to grapple in self-directed and informed ways with the multitude of challenges and complexities likely to lie ahead for them within their own teaching contexts. Moreover, I suggest that a contemporary definition of teacher reflective practice that promotes working with others, rather than solitary reflection, is essential in a pandemic context that oftentimes creates isolation.

To address the complexity and diversity of classrooms today, I have combined multiple theoretical perspectives into the following definition of teacher reflective practice: “a teacher's *social* action to analyze multiple contexts, identify a problem, and reapproach the situation with context in mind” (Blommaert; Dewey; Pankiewicz; Semin and Smith; Schön). This definition, although seemingly basic at first glance, explains the chunks of activity that comprise a robust benchmark for teacher reflective practice. This definition emphasizes that reflection is not a solitary

activity, but that teacher reflective practice must also include a collaborative platform or format for teachers to analyze and revise contextual circumstances with others. All in all, the purpose of this article is to outline how social interaction is an essential element in productive teacher reflective practice—especially in the face of a pandemic.

Context’s Role in Teacher Reflection and Teacher Reflective Practice

Through my own work with a research-writing study group, professional conversations with a university mentor, and my interaction with educators throughout a K–12 learning community combating COVID-19, I set out to consider what teacher reflective practice during a pandemic might look like.

Broadening What “Counts” as Context and Building on Prior Work

In the past, those who thought deeply about teacher reflective practice considered context to be a physical space or setting in which people interact with each other (Blommaert 3; Brameld; Dewey; Schön). However, the current “hybrid” approach to educating students includes a mix of students both in-person and at-home, complicating the idea of reflective practice coming from in-person interactions with students. In the interest of safety, these hybrid-style educators find themselves teaching in a static position in the front of their classroom with a small cohort of socially distanced and masked students, while simultaneously facilitating the instruction to the rest of the class remotely via a computer-based platform. As complex as this set of circumstances is due to one’s location, there is yet another complication to the element to context.

This other component of context in teacher reflective practice is “the social occasion” (Blommaert), where context is

dependent on social interaction involved in the social event. An example of a social occasion during the COVID-19 pandemic could be identified in the arrangement of teachers during a building or department meeting. Nowadays, most of these meetings are conducted remotely (again, in the interest of safety). Different social occasions transpire when a district leader broadcasts their messages widely to one whole group of educators versus the organization of Zoom and Google Hangout Breakout Rooms constructed for smaller group discussion. In summary, while they look different during COVID, the context involved in teacher reflective practice has both locational and social elements that can be translated to teaching during a pandemic.

Embracing a Situated Cognition Perspective in Teacher Reflective Practice

However, location and social interaction are not the only important elements of teacher reflective practice. Another important element is situated cognition, in which knowledge and understanding is acquired through a “network” of meaning that emerges through the dynamic of social interaction rather than through an individual’s thinking alone (Gee; Darwin; Smith and Semin; Semin and Smith). This contemporized theorization contributes to a newer conception of teacher reflective practice.

A practice, according to Donald Schön, who initially conceptualized reflective practice, is “made up of chunks of activity, divisible into more or less familiar types, each of which is seen as calling for the exercise of a certain kind of knowledge” (Schön 32). Practices are “socially and institutionally patterned so as to present repetitive occurrences of particular kinds of situations” (Schön 32). Simply put, according to Schön, reflective practice, is the act of approaching a situation differently based on one’s learned knowledge and

experience—to change the situation rather than letting it repeat itself. Thus, these foundational positions of teacher reflective practice contributed a fundamental expectation to revise an approach to a situation as part of reflective practice.

To reiterate, this is where a situated cognition perspective created an additional layer to this definition of reflective practice. My situated cognition lens differs from Schön's respective take on "action" that is less concerned with a teacher's deliberate social interaction. To this end, I identified the following concise definition of teacher reflective practice: Teacher reflective practice is a teacher's social action to analyze multiple contexts, identify a problem, and reapproach the situation with context in mind (Pankiewicz). This definition of (or description of the chunks of activity involved in) teacher reflective practice could serve as an effective benchmark for teacher reflective practice with an enhanced focus on complex teacher social action with easy-to-replicate simple direction. This definition implies that teacher educators must support teacher reflective practice in their analysis of the physical setting and concerns surrounding a situation in addition to facilitating an opportunity to discuss these contextual circumstances with others. Whereas it may be possible for teachers to reflect as individuals, I suggest that teacher reflective practice cannot take place in isolation. Teacher reflective practice must include a social occasion (e.g. an online discussion group, a professional learning community, or a structured feedback loop in a teacher observation process), where teachers share their reflections with others.

Gina, a high school English teacher, exemplified teacher reflective practice in the following example. When Gina was recently placed in a Zoom Breakout Room to discuss Grade 11 instructional planning with other

Grade 11 English teachers during an English department meeting, she debriefed with colleagues who shared distinct challenges in engaging students and in encouraging meaningful skills-based discussion during English classes in remote and hybrid modalities. With these contexts and problems in mind, Gina shared her recent review of "Hexagonal Thinking: A Colorful Discussion Tool" (Gonzalez), an episode of a Cult of Pedagogy podcast that interviewed teacher-author Betsy Potash, on a web site dedicated to the professional development of teachers. As such, Gina explained the idea of giving students hexagons with different lesson-based ideas written on them as a prompt for students to arrange and connect their hexagons to discuss and explain why they joined particular hexagon topics together. Through her collaboration with colleagues, Gina fleshed out an idea to use a version of hexagonal discussion to support argument writing with her Advanced Placement Language and Composition students. Since Gina was also a member of a regional AP English Teacher Summit, as well as part of an AP group on social media, she anticipated that this hexagonal approach would also support newer AP testing expectations in synthesizing different ideas and providing a progressive line of reasoning. Gina pursued additional professional conversations with her department supervisor and presented her ongoing lesson ideas with the larger high school department, where links to the hexagonal thinking podcast were posted on the department's Google Classroom thread. Gina clearly used social action with her colleagues and professional affiliations in her analysis of contexts and the identification of particular problems. Then, she reapproached these issues of student engagement and supporting newer writing expectations by creating new hybrid and remote lessons with context in mind. As a

result of Gina’s reflective practice, her students seemed to appear more engaged in annotation and follow-up discussion, negotiating text-based relationships and synthesizing information more naturally, even in the face of the pandemic.

This article was initially written to support teachers with key issues in education today such as newer student performance standards, standardized testing, more intricate and demanding teacher evaluation systems, and the navigation of an abundance of education research and evidence-based best practices. Then, the pandemic hit, reminding educators that we may never be prepared for the issues that could come our way. Many educators, like Elena, Paul, and Gina have an innate ability to demonstrate teacher reflective practice, routinely setting out to analyze their locational setting and seeking social interaction in their reflective practices. However, some educators may need more support—especially during a pandemic.

Since each issue comprises a set of complex contexts that are further complicated by the unique context of each classroom, this support of teacher reflective practice should provide a structure or platform for teachers to work with others as they analyze multiple contexts, identify a problem, and reapproach the situation with context in mind. This insistence on social interaction as a central component could contribute to supporting teachers’ capacity for teacher development as reflective practitioners in order to help prepare them to grapple in collaborative and informed ways with the multitude of challenges and complexities likely to lie ahead for them within their own teaching settings.

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