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REFLECTION IMPACTS PRESERVICE TEACHERS' INSTRUCTION AND PLANNING

Joanna C. Weaver, Ph.D.; Cynthia Bertelsen, Ph.D.; and Kaylani Othman

Abstract

Creating a habit of reflective practice promotes ongoing and sustainable instructional improvement for preservice teachers. Furthermore, reflection enables teachers to strengthen their instruction through critical analysis of student learning and engagement. While reflection may be intuitive for an in-service teacher, preservice teachers need this experience to develop intentional and automatic reflective practice. Adopted from the field of medicine, Subjective, Observation, Assessment, Planning (SOAP) Notes is a reflective strategy that allows educators to critically reflect on the lessons they have taught. SOAP Notes promote critical reflection on planning and student learning and may impact classroom management and instructional decision-making.

Keywords: reflective practice, SOAP Notes, preservice teachers, educators, instructional practice

Introduction

Creating a habit of reflective practice promotes ongoing and sustainable instructional improvement for preservice teachers. Reflective practice enables teachers to improve their instruction through critical analysis of student learning and engagement. While reflection may be intuitive for in-service teachers (experienced teachers), preservice teachers (PTs; undergraduates in third year of college) need this experience to develop intentional and automatic reflective practice. Therefore, SOAP Notes reflective strategy was introduced and implemented in a pre-methods course for education majors. Pre-methods courses occur the second semester of junior/third year. Currently, there is limited research focused on SOAP Notes in education courses.

SOAP Notes include the following four categories: Subjective, Observation, Assessment, and Planning (see Figure 1). SOAP Notes is a practice grounded in the medical field and is finding its way into the educational field. The researchers grounded their work around Many and Many's (2014) reflective structure and Schön's (1983) work on reflective practice, especially reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action (Beck & Kosnik, 2001; Farrell, 2013; Kovacs & Corrie, 2017; Many & Many, 2014; Wieringa, 2011).

Figure 1: SOAP Notes Template.
Weaver, J.C., Hartzog, M., Murnen, T., & Betelsen, C.D. (2019). Bowling Green State University.

Evaluation of Instruction (SOAP)	By:		Date:	
S	**Subjective:** Student's willingness to participate, demeanor, body language, and attitude. Teacher's perceptions and reflections			
O	**Observation** of student learning: Anecdotal notes			
A	**Assessing** student learning: Progress monitoring, running records, and oral or written comprehension			
P	**Planning** for next lesson: Use bullet points			
Challenges: What challenges did you encounter while working with your student?				
Further Learning: What else do you need to know how to do?				

The SOAP Notes strategy promotes critical reflection on lessons taught and may impact classroom management and instructional decision-making. The goal of using SOAP Notes in a pre-methods course is to ensure PTs practice reflection to strengthen instruction and student learning. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research questions: How do preservice teachers perceive the impact of SOAP Notes on teacher instruction and student learning? How did SOAP Notes inform preservice teachers about their instructional learning gaps?

Background and Relevant Literature

According to Wagner (2006), "becoming self-reflective infiltrates not only our professional lives, but our personal lives as well" (p. 30). For the PTs, using SOAP Notes as a self-reflective practice ensures they are reflecting in their instruc-

tion and how they see themselves as teachers. Similarly, Hofer (2017) states, "Reflection on practice is often viewed as a core principle for guiding improvement in professional work such as teaching" (p. 299). Furthermore, the practice of self-reflection strengthens areas of instruction by creating self-awareness of their instructional practice (Weaver & Mutti, 2021).

Using reflective practice promotes instructional improvement. Kovacs and Corrie (2017) suggest using "incisive questioning" to promote reflective practice (p. 9). For example, an incisive question that may be asked is, "What did I miss, or was not considering, in the moment?" (Kovacs & Corrie, 2017, p. 10). Posing incisive questions as such will promote starting points in reflective practice. In addition, Danielson (2008) mentions another reflective practice called dialectical thinking. Dialectical thinking allows "meaning to be reconstructed and allows changes to take place" (p. 135). Using dialectical thinking as a reflective practice allows for flexible thinking when "lower level procedures and higher level strategies are applied to a new challenge" (p. 135).

Another reflective strategy is SOAP Notes. Many and Many (2014) assert that "the practice of using SOAP [Notes] is a data driven process that emphasizes the natural progression from collection of relevant data, to the assessment of the learning problem, to development of a plan of how to proceed" (p. 1). When this awareness is made known, then it becomes easier to modify instruction for future lessons (Weaver et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021; Weaver & Mutti, 2021). Similarly, Mills et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of using SOAP Notes as a reflective practice when teaching. To strengthen reflective practice and automaticity, SOAP Notes were "collected and examined after weekly one-on-one teaching sessions for almost one full academic year" (Mills et al., 2020, p. 73).

According to Rarieya (2005), completing reflective notes, such as SOAP Notes, creates "reflective dialogue" for the PTs (Rarieya, 2005, p. 315). Reflective dialogue can be interchangeable among individuals, depending on how those notes were used and/or perceived. Likewise, Thomas and Montemery (1997) found that "reflective dialogue provides 'windows' into teachers' thinking, as it enables educators to open his or her teaching to the public through writing or talk (p. 315). Using reflective dialogue practice via SOAP Notes provides awareness of the PTs' best practices used as well as observations of student behavior and learning (Dye, 2005; Mills et al., 2020; Thomas & Montemery, 1997; Weaver & Mutti, 2021).

Killion and Todem's (1991) work highlights *reflection-for-action* (p. 15). *Reflection-for-action* involves the desired outcome of "reflection on practice and on one's actions and reflection on phenomena and on one's spontaneous ways of thinking" (p. 15). The intended goal of reflection is to analyze one's actions or decisions to improve or strengthen a desired outcome (Kovacs & Corrie, 2017; Mills et al., 2020; Rarieya, 2005; Weaver et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021; Weaver & Mutti, 2021). Practicing a metacognitive process as such enhances one's deeper thinking that results in their desired outcome. It becomes important to engage with continual learning and knowledge to ensure improvements are being made.

Research Methods

Preservice teachers spent four weeks in one field experience during their second month of university coursework. The PTs completed field placements in suburban, rural, or urban settings. During this time, PTs were teaching, co-teaching, and observing in their field classrooms. They were required to take three to five days of SOAP Notes over a four-week period based on one class in their school placement. The classroom chosen was the same class for all four weeks. During these four weeks, PTs had at least two snow days as well as two COVID-19 wellness days; therefore, they may not have completed a full four weeks of SOAP Notes.

Participants

Participants included 28 preservice teachers enrolled in their pre-methods classes at a Midwest university. Of the 28 PTs, 4 (PTs 1-4) were Career Tech Education (CTE) majors, and 24 (PTs 5-28) were Integrated Language Arts (ILA) majors. The CTE preservice teachers only attended three field days per week, and three ILA preservice teachers had to quarantine for two-weeks because of COVID-19.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data consisted of four weeks of SOAP Notes and an exit survey that was completed at the end of their four-week field experience. They completed Likert scale-like responses and an open-ended, reflective survey. All 28 PTs submitted the exit reflective survey. Using frequency counts, the researchers analyzed Likert scale responses. Erikson's (1986) coding process was utilized to interpret survey responses, and Hatch's (2002) inductive analysis was used to analyze the open-ended survey questions. The researchers independently reviewed all survey responses, identified codes and themes, and then shared them with one another. They compared individual codes and through discussion and analysis came to a consensus and identified four overriding themes and sub-categories. Using Miles and Huberman's (1994) content analysis process, researchers interpreted and identified themes.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data collected that support the two research questions. Three themes fell under the first question: How do preservice teachers perceive the impact of SOAP Notes on teacher instruction and student learning? The themes include: (a) Impact of Reflection on Planning with a subcategory of *Student Learning*, (b) Areas of Further Learning included two subcategories: *Classroom Management/Instruction* and *Technology and Assessment*, and (c) Student Attitude and Engagement included *Student Learning Outcomes*. The second research question: How did SOAP Notes inform preservice teachers about their instructional learning gaps? provided insight on the last theme: The Influence of SOAP Notes on Teaching included the subcategory *Change in Future Instruction/Evaluation of lesson*.

Impact of Reflection on Planning

After the PTs' field experiences at the local schools, they reported on how reflection impacted their planning. More than half of the PTs noted that SOAP Notes impacted their thinking by allowing them to see which strategies did or did not work during instruction. For example, PT 10 affirmed this and continued, "I got to see what could be fixed for the next class period and what could have been added or taken out of the lesson."

Furthermore, other PTs stated that SOAP Notes impacted their teaching by promoting reflection on the lessons they developed. PT 5 explained that SOAP Notes did "formulate their thoughts of teaching. It can be so easy to go into the field and just enjoy the experience, rather than actually learning from the experience." Similarly, PT 6 said, "It showed me that there truly is so much more to teaching than just 'teaching the lesson' as we need to be able to learn and grow from what it is we are teaching." Overall, the majority of PTs felt that SOAP Notes helped in revising their instruction. One sub-category that emerged from the data and discussion was student learning.

Student Learning

PTs noted student learning through their SOAP Notes reflections. PT 6 stated that SOAP Notes "showed me that each lesson will change depending on how a class responds and that part of teaching is just connecting with your students." Similarly, PT 20 stated that they "used these notes as a guide to observations in the classroom."

According to the data, completing SOAP Notes allowed the PTs to reflect on their use of assessment. For example, similar to PT 10's assertion, PT 24 said, "SOAP Notes allowed me to see how important it is to slow down where students need, and how important it is to plan and reflect in order to better the lesson for students in the near and far future."

Areas of Further Learning

The data revealed that SOAP Notes allowed PTs to reflect on their best practices and improve instruction for next time. In the survey, many of them expressed areas of further learning with instruction, classroom management, technology, and assessments.

Classroom Management/Instruction

Half of the PTs' survey responses focused on the need to learn additional classroom management (CM) strategies. They saw the connection between student behavior and student learning and realized their lack of CM strategies. For example, PT 12 explained that "[SOAP Notes] made them realize the toughness of trying to control student behavior and making them understand things." According to the data from the SOAP Notes, once PTs put classroom norms and expectations in place, student behavior was more manageable, and student learning was evident.

PTs reflected in their SOAP Notes about their instruction. Most of them were not sure how to insert themselves in the classroom setting with their cooperating mentor teacher. For example, PT 25 stated, "Some of the biggest challenges were feeling in charge in the classroom. That is an area of further learning for me is realizing that I am in charge and switching from my normal role." Similarly, PT 24 expressed one of their biggest challenges was when to "intervene" even though it was not their classroom. Furthermore, PTs also reflected on the need to have more confidence when teaching.

PT 26 expressed that they need to be "more confident because I am a young teacher teaching high school." PT 23 stated, "SOAP Notes helped me be more critical of teaching and really start to analyze what impacts a teacher's day and ultimately impacts student learning." According to the PTs' SOAP Notes, they had to modify instruction on a daily basis when a task or strategy did not engage students in learning.

Technology and Assessments

When PTs responded to further learning, the majority noted that the use of technology and creating assessments were two tasks they needed further exploration and practice. Both PT 5 and 13 expressed that they needed more learning within an online environment. In addition, PT 13 stated in their further learning section, "I need to learn how to build a better online environment. My areas of further learning would be the software that surrounds online learning." Since the use of technology has been more important than ever this past year during COVID-19, PTs reported that it was imperative for them to learn about the innovative digital strategies.

Moreover, PTs found it challenging in creating effective forms for students as well as additional assessments. PT 20 expressed that it was a challenge to come up with measurable assessments for their students. Similarly, PT 22 expressed that they needed further learning in creating formative assessments and differentiating those assessments.

Student Attitude and Engagement

Based on the SOAP Notes reflection data, PTs were made aware of the connection between the attitudes and engagement of students. The data revealed how students reacted to the content and instruction determined how they learned and perceived it. The majority of PTs noted that engagement was key in keeping students' attention during lessons.

Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes were examined by the PTs within their SOAP Notes reflective survey. For example, PT 9 stated that attitude and engagement "shows how the students are responding, as your lessons should be student-centered! Understanding their reactions will help the lessons go a long way." Knowing the student mindset helped PTs determine the changes in their lessons.

According to the data, PTs stated that if students have an attitude or fixed mindset when being instructed, they will be reluctant to learn the new material. PTs found it challenging to keep students engaged with the content due to perceived attitudes and motivation. PT 15 explained, "I think almost every day I did SOAP Notes, I was writing about students' engagement largely because the freshman class struggled with it so much. The same students were usually the ones to answer questions."

A quarter of the PTs noticed that a lack of engagement was prominent in their field experiences that made it difficult for the PTs to teach. According to the PTs, students who have unresponsive attitudes and lower levels of engagement are less likely to immerse themselves with the content. As the PTs reflected on this specific area, many found that they needed further learning in keeping their students motivated and engaged with instruction.

Influence of SOAP Notes on Teaching

The purpose of SOAP Notes is to provide PTs with an opportunity to reflect on instruction and student learning. According to the data, when PTs were able to self-reflect on their instruction and use of best practices, the majority were able to make improvements and modifications. Furthermore, they were able to accommodate their students' learning needs in the classroom.

At the conclusion of the PTs' completion of SOAP Notes, they were able to reflect on their teaching and what could be improved for next time. Furthermore, they were able to reflect on the value of SOAP Notes to adapt teaching. Student 22 stated that SOAP Notes "help you notice what went well and what went poorly in a day's lesson, so you can make adjustments in the future or try out different teaching methods."

Overall, more than half of the PTs felt that SOAP Notes provided a guide for instructional improvement. For example, PT 23 expressed that SOAP Notes can be used to modify teaching practices, ask questions, and think of strategies to strengthen instruction. Whereas, PT 27 reflected on their own engagement and learning with SOAP Notes by stating:

> Using SOAP Notes, I found myself closely looking at student behavior in class, response, reactions, etc. Similar to the assessment section, I was able to specifically look at students' work. I found the sections within the SOAP Notes very useful and directed me on where/what to closely observe in a classroom.

Furthermore, PT 27 expressed "I think the depth of reflection we were doing in these weekly notes are something for us future teachers to look back on for guidance." Using SOAP Notes as a framework for reflection will not only strengthen PTs' instruction, but also make their students' learning experiences authentic.

Discussion

Aligning with research, SOAP Notes reflection allows PTs to reflect on their lessons, instruction, and student learning (Rarieya, 2005; Thomas & Montemery, 1997; Weaver et al., 2021). By addressing certain areas of instruction, the SOAP Notes promote a critical analysis that results in the strengthening of instructional practice. The findings within this study answered the following research questions: How do preservice teachers perceive the impact of SOAP Notes on teacher instruction and student learning? How did SOAP Notes inform preservice teachers about their instructional learning gaps?

The findings suggest that SOAP Notes were useful as a self-reflection strategy in a pre-methods educational field experience. The PTs were able to critically analyze student mindset and behavior, student learning and engagement as well as instructional practice (Weaver & Mutti, 2021). They were able to reflect through the use of incisive questions (Kovacs & Corrie, 2017) within the SOAP Notes template as well as their final reflection survey.

In addition, PTs were able to reflect on instructional learning gaps, challenges, and areas for further learning, aligning with Danielson's (2008) research on dialectical thinking. The largest instructional gaps were found to be technology and crafting appropriate assessments. Overall, completing SOAP Notes highlighted PTs' awareness of instructional strategies they needed to improve on and allowed for self-reflection on best practices and student learning (Hofer, 2017).

Further research could include examining the use of SOAP Notes at different levels of education (i.e., first or second) courses. Furthermore, studying the use of SOAP Notes during the professional (fourth) year and early years of in-service teaching could provide additional data that informs the value of reflective practice and its impact on instruction and instructional decision-making when focusing on student learning (Many & Many, 2014; Mills et al., 2020).

Conclusion

When educators are able to reflect, they are able to analyze instructional decision-making that is guided by student engagement and student learning. SOAP Notes helps to inform instructional practice through reflection. When this awareness is practiced, then educators are able to respond to classroom management scenarios appropriately and efficiently. Creating a habit of reflective practice promotes ongoing and sustainable instructional improvement. Based on this study, the researchers strongly recommend that SOAP Notes be incorporated and figure more prominently in education courses.

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