

Self-Reflective Practices during Teaching and Learning of an Undergraduate Literacy Module

Nkidi Phatudi^{*}, Ina Joubert and Teresa Harris²

Department of Early Childhood Education University of Pretoria, South Africa

²James Madison University, Virginia, USA

**E-mail: Nkidi.phatudi@up.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT This paper is based on a field experience project designed as part of the foundation phase literacy programme. In this project, foundation phase teacher education student-teachers selected a teaching site and a learner or group of learners that they would teach to read in the afternoons and over the weekends. The aim of the project was to offer the teacher education student-teachers an opportunity to put theory into practice using self-reflective strategies that included group and individual reflections on instructional strategies presented in DVDs, reflections on microteaching lessons to the class, and reflections on teaching learners in local schools. During the time that they were working with their learners, they were also expected to confer with other teacher education student-teachers to exchange ideas, strategies and their 'best practice' experiences with others. Three distinct stages emerged as student-teachers taught and reflected on their experiences. Student-teachers were initially unsure of their capability of taking on the project. The second stage was that of determination to grapple with the project and the last stage was resolving to take ownership of the project. This paper recommends that projects of this nature are necessary as they allow undergraduate student-teachers opportunities for authentic learning regarding the teaching of reading.

INTRODUCTION

If we are ever to break the cycle of illiteracy and low literacy performance in schools, we must provide student teachers with the tools that they need to effectively teach all learners how to read. However, given the diverse experiences that pre-service teachers bring into Foundation Phase programmes, the challenge for teacher educators to provide appropriate literacy education can be daunting. Not all future teachers come with experiences that have engendered a love of reading, nor do they come with rich experiences in homes and classrooms where reading was valued and opportunities to read and be taught to read were positive and supportive. As future teachers enter teacher education programmes, teacher educators are faced with the challenge of

creating learning experiences that build the confidence of all their student-teachers to levels that will allow those student-teachers to positively impact the reading abilities of their future learners. Teacher efficacy is enhanced by teacher training programmes that offer student teachers opportunities to see new strategies modelled. It also provides them with opportunities to practice these strategies, and allows student-teachers to critically question and reflect on teaching and learning episodes as they are presented in their university classes and implemented on a regular basis in field placements (Shaw et al. 2007; Wasserman 2009). A study by Wasserman (2009) with the undergraduate students came to the conclusion that ‘hands-on nature of the learning experiences’ coupled with demonstrations by the facilitator is an important factor in the development of self-efficacy amongst students. However, learning opportunities that focus on developing and maintaining strong feelings of efficacy (Tschannamen-Moran and Hoy 2001) must be offered within contexts that are not threatening and coupled with practical exercises if pre-service teachers are to develop self-efficacy (Hawley and Valli 1999; Wasserman 2009). As a result, “high self-efficacy may ensure that beginning teachers cease to perpetuate the cycle of low achievement by refusing to teach using only the traditional curriculum and methods” (Wasserman 2009).

Given the importance of reading instruction in the Foundation Phase, the researchers were interested in the effectiveness of their literacy modules in preparing future teachers for the diverse abilities of their learners. Student-teachers' reflections at the end of their second year literacy module indicated that, while the course provided a foundation in theories for teaching reading, they did not feel prepared to actually teach learners how to read. A new course was developed to provide critical engagement with videotaped teaching and learning episodes that modelled reading comprehension strategies, incorporated peer coaching and tutoring, and utilised self- reflection practices to build pedagogical content knowledge and self-efficacy (Wasserman 2009). The study conducted aimed to address student teacher’s self- efficacy by providing them with authentic experiences of teaching a learner how to read.

This research project aimed to answer the following questions:

- How can the self-reflective practice assist student teachers with their own learning?
- How do student teachers relate theory to practice?
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Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study was underpinned by the legitimate peripheral participation and apprenticeship of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) as theoretical lens and the embedded concepts of self-efficacy, self-reflective practices and communities of practice. However, the concepts were identified and the theory dealt with in an interrelated manner.

Goodman, in propounding a move away from technically driven programmes to inquiry-based programmes for teacher education said: “There has been growing criticism of teacher education programmes that emphasise technical proficiency. This has resulted in a move to create teacher education programmes that encourage pre-service teachers to thoughtfully inquire into the merits of various teaching strategies, learning theories [and] instructional resources ...” (1991: 56). Learning is not about reproducing what has been learned, but it is about reconstruction of personal knowledge by critically engaging with teaching strategies, resources, learners who are to be taught, and the whole context in which teaching and learning is to take place (Goodman 1991).

Complementing Goodman's focus on the individual's reflection on theory and practice, Lave and Wenger (1991: 14) view learning as transcending cognitive processes and situate it within a social context. Rather than viewing learning as gaining knowledge and applying it in a different context, learning is about understanding theory and practice deeply enough to engage in “legitimate peripheral participation”, the process of enacting pedagogical content knowledge within communities of practice. Legitimate peripherality offers participants more than an observational status of learning to incorporate participation as a way of learning. Student-teachers take ownership of their own learning and determine what constitutes the teaching practices of the communities in which they work. Teaching methods are designed towards the particular practices of the community; as teachers, they have to take into consideration the likes and dislikes of their consumers and respect and admire these (Lave and Wenger 1991).

Self-reflective Practices

The focus on self-reflection is widespread in teacher education programmes. South Africa is no exception to this discourse and teacher education activities emphasise reflective practices rather

than technical practices. Conway (1999:3) refers to reflection practices as “guiding beacons for teacher education” that allow a course of learning to move from personal experience toward a form of self-efficacy. Reflection, or looking back, is “about reflective distance to understand better the meaning of lived experiences” and is coupled with anticipation, or “looking forward toward the future with knowledge of the past from the viewpoint of the present” (Conway 1999:5).

Self-efficacy

Self-reflection on the knowledge and skills gained through courses and practical experiences breed self-efficacy. This is seen as beginning teachers put into practice the theory and information they are learning, observe the impact of their own teaching, and reflect on their successes and challenges to modify what they understand and what they do as educators. Recognizing that they are capable and competent leads to growth in personal efficacy and, as Wasserman contends, it is self-efficacy that brings about beginning teachers’ conviction to act on their new found knowledge, beliefs and capabilities. This increased sense of self-efficacy is also a first step to end the use of less effective traditional methods that may not be relevant to the context of teaching (Wasserman 2009). According to Hawley and Valli (1999: 130),

‘Teacher efficacy is enhanced when teachers have opportunities to see new strategies modelled, practice them, engage in peer coaching, acclimate students to new ways of learning, and use new teaching and learning strategies regularly and appropriately.’

Although the general concept of self-efficacy suggests that creating opportunities in this way will improve teaching and learning, there is little research on self-efficacy in terms of literacy instruction (Bostock and Boon 2012).

Providing real world experiences by working directly with learners can provide a context for building self-efficacy (Ball and Cohen 1999; Haverback and Parault 2008; Mallette et al. 2011). For example, student teaching has been shown to be a critical experience in the development of self-efficacy (Hoy and Spero 2005; Knoblauch and Hoy 2008). The strength of the experience may lie in clearly defined expectations for pre-service teachers (Haverback and Parault 2008; Mallette et al. 2011); however, it is quite likely that an extended experience working directly with learners in contexts that provide clear expectations and support building mastery can

accomplish similar results. Furthermore, the teachers' sense of collaboration and community within the classroom context is also associated with increased self-efficacy and the academic achievement of learners (Guo et al. 2011).

Haverback and Parault's (2008) review of literature on the relationship between pre-service teacher efficacy and tutoring indicated that tutoring in a field experience had a positive impact on the pre-service teachers' ability to teach content and put theory into practice. Shaw et al. (2010) found that using a tutoring model in which pre-service teachers worked with individual learners while enrolled in a literacy course provided the real-world connection students needed between theory and practice. The connection to self-efficacy as a further dimension was an area for further research. Bandura (2007: 6) suggests that mastery experiences lead to higher efficacy, the "belief in what one can do with whatever resources one can muster".

Shaw et al. (2007) point out that because proficient teachers employ multiple methods to teach reading, pre-service teachers need to learn a variety of methods for instruction and think critically about these from a base of literacy theories and understanding of children as both learners and proficient readers.

Wasserman (2009) examines reciprocity, reflection, relationships, and personal responsibility as these factors affect the development of self-efficacy in pre-service teachers. Reciprocity involved the alignment of the course expectations and the field experience expectations so that student-teachers could make real world connections between their experiences at schools, and the theory and research presented in the lecture hall. Student reflection on their observations and on their practices in working with learners provided the vehicle whereby the student-teachers connected personal, professional, and practical knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This research project was a qualitative study conducted as action research to understand the hands-on experiences of student-teachers as they designed, implemented, and reflected on a series of literacy lessons that they conducted in Foundation Phase classrooms. Student-teachers' experiences of teaching reading through self-reflection were documented and presented as portfolios. The student-teachers wrote their self-reflection texts whilst being part of the study. They were facilitators of reading, and they were expected to be critical of their knowledge and practice throughout the different cycles of action research (Mouton 2008).

This study involved a third year Literacy Programme module and third year student-teachers. The module came into being as a result of reflections of student-teachers on the efficacy of modules at the end of their second year. Initially, student-teachers had two literacy modules in their first and second years of study. The first year module content focused on early literacy and the second year module addressed the formal teaching of reading and writing in the Foundation Phase. The second year module provided a theoretical orientation to formal literacy instruction, but lacked a strong practical component that supported classroom implementation. In response to the student-teachers' feedback and the lecturers' reflections on the module's effectiveness in preparing future teachers to teach literacy, a new module to provide a practical component was implemented for third year student-teachers in 2010.

Selecting Participant Learners

Only learners who were in the Foundation phase participated in the project. Permission was sought from the university, parents and schools the learners attended before any teaching could begin. When presenting data, student-teachers were not allowed to show pictures of learners who participated in the study. This was done to adhere to the ethics principles of the university. However, they had to present as much evidence as was possible.

The aim of the research was to bring some form of improvement in student-teachers' practice. Lichtman says that action research is 'systematic and disciplined inquiry with the intent of changing and improving practice' (2011: 139).

Third Year Literacy Module

The third year literacy module was presented to 150 Foundation Phase student-teachers enrolled in the course. The aim of the module was to bring student teachers closer to the classroom situation where reading and writing are conducted on a daily basis. To begin the module, student-teachers were assigned to groups of 8-12 to view DVDs of reading comprehension strategies (Oczkus 2009). Following each video, student-teachers completed either a group reflection or an individual reflection session that explained the strengths and limitations of the

strategies that they observed, discussed the feasibility of the strategies for Foundation Phase learners, and identified the theoretical frameworks from which the strategies came.

Next, the groups were given a specific context and reading comprehension strategy, as well as a reader commonly found in schools. They had to design one lesson and create the resources to support the teaching of their comprehension strategy to the rest of the class. They concluded this assignment with a reflection on the comprehension strategy. This was done in the lecture hall as preparation for authentic teaching with a learner.

In their authentic reading tasks, student-teachers identified a service learning site where they could work with a single learner or a small group of learners to first assess the learners in terms of reading levels and then to teach reading. No formal arrangement existed between these sites and the University of Pretoria. However, in doing this they had to follow the ethics principles stipulated by the University. For this part of the assignment, the student-teachers worked individually but conferred with their group members and the lecturer in the development of a series of lessons that they designed, taught, and reflected on. Over the course of at least 20 hours of interaction with the learner, student teachers collected work samples and wrote detailed explanations discussing the child's performance and progress, using miscue analysis of a reading text at the beginning and end of the project.

Portfolio

The portfolio as the summative assessment tool was central to this module. Student teachers were required to keep a portfolio that included an essay on reading comprehension using scholarly sources and information from the DVDs; a reflection on teaching guided reading, and the related artefacts that showed the learners' progress and their own growth in teaching the learners. Evidence of their discussion from ClickUp, the University's internal electronic discussion board, and a final reflection of their experience in the module were part of the portfolio.

FINDINGS

Upon completion of the teaching practice, all student-teachers submitted their portfolios with lesson plans and reflections for review. The reflections were then analysed for emerging themes. The findings can be divided into three distinct phases. The initial stage reflects the student-teachers' uncertainties and trepidation about the project. The second stage reflects the student-teachers' ability and determination to grapple with the project. The third stage reflects their ability to take ownership of the project and use it to support their learners and their own professional development.

Trepidation (Initial Stage)

A journey of planning for reading and teaching reading was a bit daunting for student-teachers. They felt overwhelmed by the hours they had to spend with learners while simultaneously juggling the demands of other modules in their programme. As one student wrote:

'Starting off this assignment I felt unsure of how to facilitate reading comprehension and I was not very familiar with the practice of guided reading. I felt as though a more detailed description of what was expected of us was needed to give us some direction on what methods and strategies we were to use and what concepts were important to cover. I therefore found the DVDs that we watched in class very helpful as I was able to use the strategies described in them to create and plan interactive and relevant reading and writing lessons'.

Student-teachers then selected learners that they would teach to read. Within a week, they changed their first choice of learners – simply because their first learner could not read. They interpreted the project as requiring them to 'successfully' teach their learners how to read. The project was however about the 'process' of teaching reading and not necessarily the end product. It was expected that student-teachers would take learners through a series of reading lessons to build comprehension and reflect on the process of this interaction. Student teachers were expected to step outside of their 'interaction' with learners and critically look at the process. Questions such as: "Did I provide learners with the correct tools for learning?", "Were my methods and strategies successfully used?" and "How can I adapt my methods to address the

needs of learners?” were critical in evaluating the process of teaching reading and to keep the student-teachers focused on their roles as teachers.

Grappling with the Project

Student-teachers felt that the project needed a lot of work and time to complete. However, after the first few ‘laps’ “they enjoyed it”, as one student stated. The fact that this was a practical assignment of ‘linking theory to practice’ required significant thought and planning. Student-teachers felt that the assignment offered them an opportunity to take strategies learnt in class, adapt them as their own, and then reflect on their effectiveness.

A student reported that:

‘This assignment has been a good experience for me as I feel it has made me feel more confident when teaching learners how to read and what questions to ask. When I started this assignment I was apprehensive as I was very unsure what to do with the learner. I now understand what to do when teaching a learner guided reading and comprehension. I feel more confident by doing this assignment which has helped me to test and know what level a learner is on and what they should be achieving’.

Another student wrote:

‘...by having background knowledge of what reading comprehension is and what it all consists of, made it much easier for me to think of practical exercises I can do with my learner to help her improve her reading, and so far so good’.

The discussion forum on the university intranet ClickUp site offered a platform for sharing and discussing experiences and challenges met in teaching learners in class. Some of the experiences of student-teachers reflected the inside classroom practices adopted by teachers, which were incongruent to what they were taught in the lecture room. Student-teachers felt that the way learners were taught reading did not excite them. One student expressed her dissatisfaction about learners’ attitudes towards reading by saying that:

“.....learners have this perception about reading; they think READING CAN’T BE FUN! It is so sad, because where does this attitude come from?” She ended this on a positive note stating that the problem with reading probably does not reside with learners but actually with how reading has been presented to learners. This sentiment was held by most of the student-teachers’.

A number of strategies and modelling ideas were used to ensure that learners read with comprehension. It became important to convince student-teachers that reading is more fun if accompanied by comprehension. The challenge was how to accomplish this. Reading does not take place in a linear fashion, but has to incorporate a number of techniques and strategies to decode the written word. The teaching of vocabulary, punctuation and decoding skills were seen to be integral to teaching reading. What was lauded as more important was making a storyline explicit to learners. One student who thought this was important had this to say about storyline:

“Introducing a storyline to Gerhard was important to me, because how can you organize a story if you don’t know the storyline? How can he make connections to the story if he doesn’t know the storyline?”

Teaching reading caused student-teachers to reflect on some of the challenges they met or anticipated that they might encounter in the future. As they identified problems they faced, they also identified strategies to address those challenges. Many student-teachers spoke of “hyperactive” learners who had short attention spans. Rather than giving up, they focused on their own practices and shortened assignments to accommodate learners’ ability to attend, adapted assignments to minimize frustration, incorporated different media to actively engage learners, or identified texts that reflected learners’ interests. When problems were directly related to reading skills, student-teachers identified intervention strategies or consulted with their peers through ClickUP to find out what others had successfully used. For example, one student raised the following concern:

‘I have picked up that she memorizes words and yet her teacher says she can read. I picked this up when I gave her a fairly easy book and she really battled but was fluent when reading her own harder book. Any Suggestions?’

Group members responded by saying:

‘I think you should use sight words. That’s what I did with my learner...I can give you a list of sight words I have’.

‘Nothing wrong with memorization. It is part of pre-reading, but make sure they are learning their letter sounds too...I think you should ask your learner to read the stories backwards. That sounds like a lot of fun!’

Student-teachers also noted that culture and the schooling system have to be compatible for learners to achieve success in literacy. They also felt that this area was neglected in schools and thus it led to grave consequences on the part of learners:

‘Working with my learner as well as my teaching practical experience this year has also truly opened my eyes to how weak South Africa’s literacy levels can be. This assignment is giving us an opportunity to change this reality in at least one child’s life; this should be seen as an honour. As I am working with my learner I am changing and adapting my plans to meet the needs of the learner. I think this is a very valuable skill to have as a teacher as every class you teach is not going to be the same as the year before and you need to be able to adapt quickly to the theories and strategies that best suit the needs of the learners sitting in front of you’.

Student-teachers agreed that this opportunity opened up reality for them. They had preconceived ideas about what a Foundation Phase child would be able to do. This was unlikely the case.

Taking Ownership of the Project

The project also taught the student teachers a few good lessons. Student teachers experienced opportunities for discovery and active construction of effective literacy practices for their individual learners. This was shown throughout the discussions posted on ClickUp. Whilst showing apprehension about taking on this task of teaching reading, the student-teachers also commended the exercise for bringing out the best of their “other sides” (possibilities and capabilities they had), of which they themselves were unaware of. They now regarded themselves as capable problem-solvers, a trait they were formerly oblivious to. Student-teachers felt that the assignment gave them the opportunity to link theory with practice and also allowed ‘hands-on’ classroom time. Student-teachers also realized that they felt some emotional attachment to the task and to the learners they were teaching. They sympathized with them if they could not do the work and they rejoiced with them if they succeeded in doing the tasks assigned them. They felt obliged to help learners even after the project was over. They took special interest in learners and felt bound to help them. They took ownership of the project and felt duty-bound to make sure that learners gain some level of proficiency in reading and writing. Comments from student-teachers in this regard include:

'It was truly amazing for me to see how my child developed and how he got better every time I worked with him. It was really sad to say goodbye to him, but I'm sure what he learned from me will stay with him, and the best part of it all, he has developed a love for reading'.

'I am planning on staying on. Helping my learner after this project has been completed as I feel we could both benefit from working together over time'.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with Wasserman's (2009) 4-R model of reciprocity, reflection, relationships and responsibility, the design of the literacy module appears to have led to increased self-efficacy among the third year student-teachers. Course expectations for appropriate reading comprehension strategies, as modelled in DVDs, were critically analysed by small groups of student-teachers prior to implementation with Foundation Phase learners. This laid the groundwork for student-teachers to connect prior knowledge from previous coursework that focused on the theoretical basis for teaching reading to the practical application in the classroom. Student-teachers used their peer groups established at the beginning of the module as a source of support as they questioned the practices that they observed in the field and those modelled in the DVDs, creating their own communities of practice within the larger course membership. This on-going *reciprocity* between the university coursework and field experiences facilitated the student teachers' abilities to make connections between theory and practice.

Reflection served a central function in helping student-teachers to critically consider the effectiveness of their lessons for their learners as they moved from personal knowledge gained from previous experiences and course work, to the application of that content knowledge in real world settings. Assignments were designed to facilitate their systematic reflection of each day's lessons and of learner performance, creating a structure for identifying both successes and problems and the appropriate interventions that might be employed.

Relationships among the student teachers as members of a community of practice, and between student-teachers and learners within the field experience were central to the development of self-efficacy. Shaw (2011) found that students working together in study groups were empowered to foster their own growth in understanding of teaching reading. The student teachers in this study also found that when they had difficulty meeting the needs of their learners, they could turn to

their peers for support as they worked collaboratively to solve the problems that they faced. Gradually, the student-teachers began to accept *responsibility* as future educators to work collaboratively with one another to address the challenges that they will face in their own classrooms. Their self-efficacy was further enhanced by the active engagement of their learners during the tutoring sessions, a finding supported by Guo et al. (2011).

Building on Goodman's (1991) perspective that student-teachers reconstruct their personal knowledge through critical engagement with learners, strategies, resources, and contexts, student-teachers in the third year literacy module extended their prior knowledge of teaching reading to a first-hand experience working with learners in Foundation Phase contexts. Prior to the field placement and continuing through the end of the term, student-teachers were expected to critically reflect on their actions and their learners' learning to promote reading comprehension. However, they weren't expected to do this alone, but were placed into peer groups that acted as communities of practice, supporting one another as they tested out theories and practices discussed in the lecture hall and implemented in the classroom (Lave and Wenger 1991).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this project suggest that self-efficacy among pre-service teachers can be enhanced when theory and pedagogical content knowledge are connected to opportunities for student-teachers to observe strategies that are modelled with learners, and then to practice those strategies in authentic contexts. Reflection as individuals and as a community of learners to critically analyse the theories, strategies, contexts, and the impact of the strategies for learning is the recursive element in this model. The model of action and reflection on action drives each step forward from conceptualizing appropriate instructional practices through implementation of strategies and interactions with learners, to the evaluation of teaching and learning. This paper recommends that projects of this nature should be given to undergraduate student-teachers as they allow them opportunities for authentic practice in teaching reading to learners.

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