Reflection On Teaching: A Way To Learn From Practice

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Abstract

Developing students’ reflection on their learning is currently one of the major learning goals in higher education. Today’s students need to be prepared to function in the rapidly changing world of professional practice. In line with the above, reflection is currently a key concept in teacher education. The purpose of the present study is to support student teachers’ reflection. More specifically, to find out what kind of problematic situations students face in their practical teaching and which levels of activity they report in reflection when using a reduced version of the guided reflection procedure. The analysis is based on 34 written individual reports of the student teachers from a university in Estonia. Data was analysed using qualitative content analysis method, the employed coding scheme was developed based on Korthagen & Vasalos (2005) model of core reflection. The majority of problems were brought out in connection with the students themselves. Finding solutions to the problematic situations showed that reflections were made on all levels of the onion model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). The most frequent level of reflection was the level of beliefs, followed by environment, behaviour, competencies, identity and mission.

1. Introduction

Developing students’ reflection on their learning and behaviour is currently one of the major learning goals in higher education. Today’s students need to be prepared to function in the rapidly changing world of professional practice. In line with the above, reflection is currently also a key concept in teacher education. Reflection can be defined as a cognitive process carried out to learn from experience. Reflection allows the creation of knowledge about one’s own cognition and regulation of that cognition (see e.g. Leijen, 2008; Leijen, Valtna, Leijen & Pedaste, 2012). Following the above, reflection is facilitated in teacher education programmes to allow student teachers to become conscious of and thoughtful about their actions, as opposed to using trial and error to deal with confusing
1.1. Supporting student teachers reflection in MIMO project

MIMO (Moving In, Moving On! Application of Art-Based Methods to Social and Youth Work) was an interdisciplinary cooperation project between Estonian and Finnish institutions of higher education that also involved youth work agencies, secondary schools as well as hobby schools from both countries. The aim of the MIMO project was to give the youth of different rural areas a possibility to participate in various art workshops. In September 2011 MIMO workshops of performing arts started to take place in ten Estonian Schools and/or youth centres. The workshops were conducted by staging teams of Tartu University Viljandi Culture Academy students, including the students of dance art, theatre art, visual technology, traditional music, and leisure time manager-teacher. The aim of the workshops from autumn 2011 to spring 2012 was to stage a production with each group (dance, drama or puppet performance, video, concert, show, installation, happening or any medium form). The larger aim of the workshops was to provide the students with a possibility to carry out their pedagogical practical work. An essential part of the practical work was the supporting of reflection skills that, as mentioned above, is a key factor of teacher training. The present article considers the aim of supporting reflection skills in more detail.

ALACT model that was developed to support student teacher reflection process by Fred Korthagen (1985) is a suitable frame for enhancing the reflection of teachers. According to the model, the process of reflection consists of five phases: 1) action, 2) looking back at the action, 3) becoming aware of the essential aspects, 4) creating alternative methods of action, 5) trial of the alternative methods of action. Earlier studies (see e.g. Husu, Toom, & Patrikainen, 2008; Leijen, Lam, Wildschut & Simons, 2009) have pointed out that reflection is a challenging activity for several students and therefore reflection activities need to be guided. The ALACT model describes a structured reflective process, but it does not tell us much about the content of reflection: what does or should the teacher reflect upon? One useful model for extending the above described processes is the onion model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) that contains six levels which can influence the functioning of a teacher. These levels are: the environment that refers to everything that is outside of the person; behaviour that refers to a person’s behaviour (both effective and ineffective); competencies that include different competencies of a person; beliefs that include different beliefs of a person; identity that refers to the self-understanding of a person; mission that refers to callings and inspirations of a person. As pointed out earlier, Korthagen distinguishes between two concepts: reflection and core reflection. When reflection extends to the two deepest levels in the onion model, it is referred to as core reflection (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Based on the notion of core reflection (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005) and guided reflection (Husu, Patrikainen & Toom, 2009) designed Sööt & Leijen (2012) a methodical instruction for guided core reflection. The basis of the instruction was the practical model of guided reflection of Husu et al. (2009) that consisted of three stages. The first stage included the videotaping of the activity/lesson, in which the activities of the teacher were centred upon and was followed by a stimulated recall interview. The second stage included a reflective discussion and in the third stage the student teacher presented his/her portfolio. Critical circumstances/problematic situations and their analysis have a central position in the model of Husu et al. (2009). In the current research one of the referred-to methods phase - the portfolio - was applied. The main aim of the present study was to find out what kinds of problematic situations students indicate and which levels of activity they report in reflection while applying the reduced version of the guided reflection procedure.
2. Methods

The analysis is based on the reports of the students of Theatre and Dance Art curricula of the Department of Performing Arts and the students of Leisure Time Manager/Teacher curriculum of the Department of Culture Education of the Viljandi Culture Academy of Tartu University that participated to the MIMO project in 2011–2012. The practical and pedagogical questions of students were solved by mentors; organisational questions were answered by local contact persons. The role of the university, i.e. Viljandi Culture Academy of Tartu University, was to mainly co-ordinate the activity (rather than directly intervene with the supervision process). The students conducted performing arts-related workshops in ten different schools and youth centres. One group consisted of five to seven students from the aforementioned specialities, i.e. mixed groups of different specialities were formed. The workshops that support creative self-expression in youth (i.e dance, music, acting, games etc) were conducted. In the end of project students submitted their portfolios where problematic situations were described and reflected on based on a provided questionnaire. The analysis was based on 34 written individual reports. Problem categories were evolved using the inductive method and problem levels were analysed using qualitative content analysis method, the coding scheme developed by Sööt & Leijen (2012) was employed. All data of written reflections was coded to answer the research questions. The analysis of written reflections began by dividing data into units of analysis. A unit of analysis was the smallest unit that bore independent meaning from reflection levels point of view. The text was coded thought by thought, one unit of analysis being one understandable thought or idea with a distinct meaning. Conjunctions, words with no meaning and embolalia were not coded. As the second step of the analysis the authors coded all units of analysis according to the coding scheme of Korthagen & Vasalos (2005) that was created on the basis of the six levels of the onion model.

3. Results

3.1. Themes of the problematic situations

The following problematic situations were brought out in answering the question What kinds of problematic situations do the students encounter in practical teaching?, two main categories were distinguished. The majority of problems were brought out in connection with oneself, i.e. students, and the target group, i.e. the pupils. The problems of oneself, i.e. the students, included personal lack of motivation, inadequate teaching ability which then leads to lack of time and unprepared workshops. Often were brought out the issues with misunderstanding between students and mentor. Also the different expectations of youngsters and students proved to be a problematic area. For example: I started encountering problems in the middle of the year. All the students of our group were having busy times and nobody had very much time to deal with MIMO, but you cannot leave pupils waiting. I felt that nobody was devoted enough and started feeling unmotivated myself. The problems of pupils, i.e. the target group, included children’s/youngster’s irregular participation in workshops i.e being late, leaving early, being absent. Pupils' lack of motivation and interest created tensions within groups of pupils. Often the pupils were shy and lacked their own initiative. For example: we gave pupils a home task. We asked them to raise their hands if they have Christmas lights, flashlights or table lamps at home. Everybody did. Whose parents would allow them to take these items to school? Again everybody raised their hands. Who would take one of these items along the next time? Everybody raised their hands. The following time nobody had brought anything with them. So, we asked them to bring the items along the next time. The following time only one of them had brought the item along. We asked them again to bring the items for the next meeting, and again, only one girl had brought the item. When I asked them to honestly say why they had failed to bring the items with them, they confessed that they couldn't be bothered. Several researchers have come to similar results. The teacher development model of David Berliner (Barone, Berliner, Blanchard, Casanova, McGowan, 1996) describes the development of a teacher as a five-step process, as a change in his pedagogical discussion and decision-making. The students that participated in the study might be seen as teachers of the novice level. The first steps and knowledge of a teacher operating on the first or novice level are context free and rigid. Such teachers need and apply rules that are simple but regrettably not considerate of specific conditions and circumstances (Barone et al., 1996).
At the same time, novice teachers’ “abundance of concerns” might refer to their professional self-consciousness and development. The perception of the different spectres of a teaching profession (even as problems) indicates development, teacher’s professional awareness. The image of a reflective practicing/learning teacher requires that teachers were aware of their development and attentive about the fact. Only outbound focus (pupils, i.e. the target group, related problems) is problematic in teacher education, because it excludes the possibilities to promote self-regulated learning among future teachers, who in turn could promote self-regulated learning among their students (Conway, Clark 2003).

3.2. Experiences based on the onion model

Answering the question On which levels of activity reflection was reported? the following appeared. The most frequent level of reflections was the level of beliefs, followed by environment, behaviour, competencies, identity and mission. Beliefs level category (N=132) included idea units in which beliefs, convictions, principles and values were mentioned. It was perceivable that students have many clear beliefs about teaching and teaching-related aspects. The students haven’t had that many possibilities to implement their beliefs into practice. This indicated the clear viewpoints, principles and opinions, i.e. awareness of the ideal situation. The mentioned beliefs can be said to be on the level of the beginner teacher—her/his ideal picture of teaching methods, relationship with students and the environment, but also what they do not consider acceptable. The students perceived self-dependent limiting factors and realised on several occasions that limiting factors can be reduced by applying one’s strengths. Ideal teaching situations are definitely easier to achieve by getting more experience; lack of teaching experience is often the greatest limiting factor. Environment level category (N=105) included idea units that were mentioned outside the scope of oneself, including rooms, students and their actions, mentor, contact person and influences of the environment. Aspects related to others’ behaviour and restrictions of the environment. This level of reflection indicates beginner teacher’s relatively strong level of attention towards the surrounding circumstances. Behaviour level category (N=80) included idea units that were mentioned related to the behaviour of oneself or of others. The level answered the following questions: "What did I do?", "How did I behave?", "What were my models of behaviour and factors limiting behaviour?". Behaviour of oneself was brought out as a self-dependent limiting factor. It was found that one’s own behaviour should have been different, other kinds of solutions should have been offered, and less emphasis should have been put on expecting responsible behaviour from the pupils. At the same time, own solutions were found in case of inconsiderable initiative from the pupils. Competencies and skills level category (N=53) included idea units that discussed competencies and skills—the ones that were already mastered as well as the ones that were not. The category involved competencies and skills that were mentioned due to gained experience, new knowledge and the mobilisation of one’s strengths. For example, new activities were devised within class or the establishment of a new group was started. Identity level category (N=21) included idea units on how did students perceive and determine themselves as teachers as well as personally. New knowledge that had been perceived during the process was mentioned. One learned about things that motivate and things that don’t motivate and that one is capable of pulling oneself together in critical situations. Mission level category (N=3) included idea units that discussed one’s role in the production team. Group’s role/support as a self-motivator and one’s calling in life was also discussed. These results indicate that reflection took place on all six levels of the onion model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). The most frequent level of beliefs and the least frequent level of mission indicate that novice teachers have many beliefs about what and how they should teach (that has also been studied in the university), but their mission, one’s readiness to apply these is still small. They are still in search of themselves and in doubt about their competencies as well as their mission as a teacher. They lack sufficient teaching experience that would determine the students’ identity and mission as a teacher. In comparison with a former study (Sööt & Leijen, 2012) that applied a three-stage methodological procedure of guiding and supporting reflection, the present study that used just one stage – written reflection – didn’t include enough support of the students to reach the deeper levels of reflection. The method of the present study provided an overview of the levels of reflection, but in order to support reflection and direct it to deeper levels it would be reasonable to include a multistage research model in the future.
4. Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to support student teachers’ reflection. More specifically, to find out what kind of problematic situations students face in their practical teaching and what levels of activity they report in reflection when using a reduced version of the guided reflection procedure. The results showed that the majority of problems were brought out in connection with oneself, i.e. students, and the target group, i.e. the pupils. Conway & Clark (2003) point out that novice teacher’s outward problems are imperative and natural, but at the same time it is also important and valuable to focus on the inside as it signals movement towards reflective practice. Novice teachers’ ability to focus on understanding oneself is a presupposition to understanding others. Only the outward guided focus is problematic in teacher education as it would exclude the possibility to promote self-regulated learning among future learners, who in turn could promote self-regulated learning among their students. The results of the present study are in accordance with the thought of Conway & Clark (2003) about the multi-directional movement of novice teachers’ problems. The reflection level analysis brought out that reflections were made on all levels of the onion model (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). The most frequent level of reflection was the level of beliefs, followed by environment, behaviour, competencies, identity and mission. These findings suggest that the onion model helped to specify on which levels are the student teachers’ problems located and which levels can direct the teaching process. Korthagen & Vasalos (2005) state the importance of core reflection in connecting all the levels, which fosters the professional development of a teacher on the basis of the teacher’s inspiration and strengths. The present study is based on portfolios, in which students reflected on their own behaviour on the basis of provided questions without direct interference from the supervisor. In comparison with a former study that applied a three-stage complete guided reflection procedure (Sööt & Leijen, 2012) the present study lacked the support of the students to reach the deeper levels of reflection. The methodology that was used in the present study provided an overview of the problems that students encountered during their teaching period and the levels of reflection. At the same time, in order to support reflection and direct it to the deeper levels it would be reasonable to apply a multistage research model in the future. Directing attention to core reflection during their professional preparation can help prospective teachers to become more aware of the core qualities of their pupils, so that they will be better able to guide children in their learning, and help them mobilize their core qualities, in school and in their future lives (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Reflective way of thinking requires guidance and support in order to fulfil its learning potential. It is possible to help the studying teachers to be more competent and effective by helping them to identify and understand their work and its contradictions: the gap between what they wish to accomplish and real practice (Husu et al., 2009). In conclusion the experience provided students with knowledge about themselves. They learned to find solutions in difficult teaching situations, analyse questions and problems that arose during their activities and make conclusions. The experience was said to be essential in their future work as teachers of children and young people.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the European Social Foundation program Eduko (via Archimedes Foundation) and Central Baltic INTERREG IV A 2007–2013, MIMO – Moving In, Moving On! Application of Art Based Methods to Social and Youth Work.

References


