Reinventing Reflective Learning Methods in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of teaching the capacity to be reflective at earlier stages of the professional development, so that individuals can be more receptive to change throughout their career. It presents the case of 14 teacher trainees, whose use of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth was investigated by means of a systematic enquiry method. Results showed that this approach can facilitate in-depth reflection, lead to autonomous learners that can make sense of the way old beliefs interfere with new theories and who are able to make the right decisions for changing professional practice.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The nature and purpose of the paper

This paper discusses the importance of teaching the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of the professional development, so that individuals can be more receptive to change throughout their career. The process of adapting to change requires not only adjustment to new situations, but also understanding, accepting and implementing into practice of new ideas, concepts or approaches. In the case of TE, it is argued that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that they need to learn in order to become competent teachers, trainees have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training (Parjares, 1992; Brookfield, 1995; Williams and Burden, 1997).

The present study is part of a larger-scale research which looks at different methods used by teacher training programmes to promote continuous professional development. It offers insights into trainees’ beliefs and
perceptions about teaching before they started the training course. It also analyses the changes into trainees’ perceptions and beliefs about teaching which could contribute to developing a sense of self as a teacher and could facilitate further learning. This study suggests that through systematic reflective enquiry they could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions might contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers.

1.2. The background work and the practical applications

The present study investigated the case of 14 students enrolled on an ITE course in a Romanian university. These students hold firm and diverse beliefs about the teaching profession, based on their own schooling experiences, long before they enter the classroom and they persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. These prevent them from embracing completely the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn in order to become effective educators (Kagan, 1992; Fajet et al., 2005). The challenge for the training programme is to respond to the needs of these students who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their teaching behaviour, and prepare them for the challenges they are going to face throughout their teaching career.

This study started from the assumption that through guided reflection the students could bring their beliefs to a conscious level. Articulating and examining their perceptions may contribute to a better understanding of how they view teaching as well as the skills they needed to acquire to become competent teachers.

Trainees should be encouraged to examine through critical reflection, how the instruction they are receiving embodies what they are learning about teaching (Freeman and Richards, 1996). Thus, teaching the pre-service teachers the capacity to be reflective at earlier points of their teacher development becomes an important issue for teacher training programmes (Pollard, 2002). The question in hand remains the best method to employ for in-depth processes.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Reflection as a means for teacher professional development

This research approached the opportunities of reflection trainee students have during the course as it was considered that reflection outcomes can bring about changes into their perceptions and beliefs about teaching, as stated above. A starting point was the attempt to identify teaching beliefs and attitudes because it is assumed these are central to teaching behaviour. Teachers’ beliefs about themselves, about learning and its educational relevance and about learners if consistent with their action are vitally important for effective teaching. Literature brings evidence to support the hypothesis that teachers are influenced by their beliefs which are closely linked to their values, their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it. Beliefs determine how individuals organise and define tasks and problems and can be predictors of how teachers behave in the classroom. They influence the way teachers plan their lessons, the kind of decisions they make and their general classroom practice. Teachers hold beliefs about their learners, about learning, about teaching and about themselves as individuals and professionals (Woods, 1996).

The concepts of reflective teaching and learning are referred to as facilitators for teacher professional development. The concept of reflective teaching comprises any process that encourages in general an attitude of ongoing exploration and enquiry that encourages awareness of the factors affecting teacher trainees’ learning, choices made about the organisation of activities in the classroom, and the use of techniques and materials etc. (Zeichner and Liston, 1996). The concept of reflective learning adopted here a tentative interpretation of given
elements which comprises examination, exploration, introspection and analysis of all attainable consideration which will define and clarify the problem in hand (Pollard, 2002).

2.2. Systematic enquiry methods to promote in-depth reflection

The rationale for using a systematic approach to questioning trainees is based on the assumption that in order to embrace the pedagogical practices that they need to learn in order to become competent teachers, they have to bring their beliefs about teaching to a conscious level and accommodate them with new knowledge acquired during the training. Reflection processes are based on a similar type of reasoning where the analysis phase that any subject goes through would comprise Awareness > Acceptance > Action, therefore the association in this context.

The study also employed a concept of helping individuals to identify needs and adapt to change by means of questions developed from an extensive research study on effective sale skills, whose findings lead to the conclusion that successful change in opinion was made by asking smart questions in a particular sequence. This concept used previously in the business field was transferred to teacher education, as there were considered the similarities in challenges faced by professionals in any situation of change. The latter normally involves awareness of existing and previous experiences, their analysis that leads to the understanding and acceptance of the new situation/concept/process, that later make their implementation easier. The model is based on the conceptualization of change situations in four stages: Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff (SPIN) (Rackham, 1996). Each stage corresponds to a set of questions which focus at different levels on identifying needs/problems and ways to meet/solve them. In other words by answering these questions one can explain how the solution they found could help them solve their problems. These types of questions are considered the most helpful and constructive. They are not about convincing trainees on the rightness or incorrectness of different methods, strategies or concepts, but about creating the right conditions to allow them to convince themselves of what works best for them.

3. Methodology

The study has a qualitative approach. It investigates 14 trainees’ awareness level of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth, by means of questionnaires and interviews, before and after the implementation of a reflective enquiry method. Participants, undergraduate students, females, with no teaching experience, were randomly selected on voluntary bases and participated to this study throughout their final undergraduate year of study.

The study used open ended questionnaires before, during and after the training, for both theoretical and practical components. By means of open-ended questions, the first questionnaire intended to elicit information about trainees’ expectations of the course and their opinions on the types of knowledge and skills important for their professional development. The second questionnaire focused on trainees opinions about the course attended in relation with their understanding of ‘teaching’ and their further professional development and their personal involvement with reflective processes. Different levels of reflection that trainees were able to show at the beginning of their training were researched according to categories of reflection (Bailey et al., 2001).

The interviews aimed both at clarifying and complementing data from questionnaires and asking particular questions in a particular sequence. They were built on the SPIN model and were based on the data provided in the two questionnaires. Data from questionnaires and interviews were prepared and coded for analysis. There was an inter-reliability test done by a second researcher. Quantitative information was considered to have less relevance for the purpose of this study and is not presented in this paper.

4. Findings and discussion
For the purpose of this paper, the study investigated the trainees’ understanding of ‘teaching’ and professional development and their awareness of reflective processes in relation to their understanding of professional identity and growth, using a systematic enquiry method.

4.1. Trainees background knowledge about teaching and teacher education at the beginning of the course may influence the way training is perceived

Trainees’ reasons for enrolling on the course referred to the acquisition of skills necessary for a good teaching practice, while their statements about their expectations came to complement the former. They revealed the aspects of their learning that they would like to improve or develop. They expected to be taught about strategies and methods of language teaching that they could apply when entering the classroom. The idea of getting ‘recipes’ or ‘tips’ for teaching in different contexts was recurrent. Other trainees were hoping that by attending this course they would understand their preference for teaching, their own teaching or other teaching styles that they had experienced. They also expected that the course would offer them the confidence they needed in order to perform well in front of their students.

The trainees’ answers about the characteristics of a good teacher offered more insights into trainees’ understanding of professional development. They resulted in a complex portrait of a professional who needed to combine knowledge of the language he/she teaches and pedagogical content knowledge. Personal qualities such as patience and the ability to adapt to and understand any situation were regarded as a necessity when working with individuals at different ages.

In terms of their opportunities to reflect the participants to the study declared that courses were based on information transfer methods and the questionnaires they answered in this research were the first occasion to express opinions based on their previous experiences as students in the classroom. Lack of depth of reflection could also be noticed when analysing their observation reports which were highly descriptive without comments, reasons or any kind of critical analysis also the observation sheets were built in an inquisitive manner.

4.2. Theoretical and practical training experience triggers reflection

The second questionnaire revealed the trainees’ understanding of ‘teaching’ and their professional development after attending the theoretical module of the course. Trainees considered that the course responded to their expectations. They considered it useful for the teaching practice as they learned how to plan a lesson and how to make a lesson successful (by being offered examples / suggestions of what to apply in practice, what methods/strategies to use), they got classroom management information, they discussed about the factors that affect teaching. The course also responded to their needs in terms of the knowledge provided. Pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical-content knowledge and knowledge of psychology of different age groups were previously mentioned by trainees as important for their professional development and key elements in ‘good.

During the interviews trainees were asked questions that were based on their previous answers in the questionnaires. Questions were organised in sequences based on the SPIN model, starting with the SITUATION stage they presented in their answers, moving towards analysis and finding solutions. During the interviews they started reflecting on past school experiences, trying to put themselves in their teachers’ shoes, observing them during the courses and making judgement about their teaching applying the knowledge they acquired. At the same time they tried to understand vocation and the skills and knowledge involved into teaching, the difficulties of being a professional and the administrative issues related to teaching.

Trainees considered that reflecting on their teaching practice helps them to understand the complexity of it making them aware of the week points and assisting them in finding ways of improvement by continuous exploration and enquiry, to understand other teacher’s actions and their students’ actions, to make the right decision regarding their teaching and adapt to different contexts. Unfortunately, the opportunities of reflection
during the courses were limited to peer group discussions on a specific topic and to discussions in larger groups on teaching/teaching experience. They also mentioned critical and productive conversations with a friend, colleague, family member etc. concerning the information received and the way it can be applied into practice. There was no guided reflection that could point the important issues to be considered.

5. Conclusions

The challenge for any training programme is to respond to the needs of these students who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, which influence their teaching behaviour. The present study showed that the course participants were enrolled on provided relevant knowledge that responded to trainees needs within familiar contexts. Trainees recognized them and could report to them critically. But engaging in reflection about teaching or learning required that each of the trainees rendered as problematic what they had been taking for granted about what was happening in the classrooms, the origins of the schooling activities, and their consequences upon children and the society both in the immediate and longer-range future. But guided reflection was scarce as the depth of the reflective processes they were engaged in depended on a practice of reflection they were not familiar with. The training programme failed in this respect to offer the trainee students guidance for effective introspection, therefore failed to affect in depth their initial beliefs about teaching and develop a defined self as a teacher. In the context of nowadays competitive learning teaching environments for teacher trainees who have a diverse background of abilities, experiences and expectations, I affirm the necessity of a curriculum for teacher education that introduces reflective methods to all components of the training that could influence their further professional development.

This research has its limitations given by the qualitative nature of the investigation, the case study. Although it was not meant to offer data for generalization, it provides valuable insights into the needs of trainees to use reflection as an enhancing tool for teacher learning.

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