Critical reflection: tools for curriculum implementation and innovation

Mumthaz Banoobhai
Tshwane University of Technology, 1 Aubrey Matlala Road, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

Abstract

Radical policy reform needs teachers to embrace radical approaches to teaching and learning practices. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of critical reflective classroom practice in helping teachers to adapt more easily to changing policy, societal and classroom needs. Emerging from the theoretical review was the need for teachers to be prepared for changing teaching and learning contexts through a strong focus on critical and reflective classroom practice. A review of earlier literature on critical reflective practice specifically related to teacher education was undertaken as the methodology for this paper. The paper will therefore focus on why I think that critical reflective practice can provide teachers with tools that will allow them to adapt to changing educational landscapes and assist with the implementation of progressive, postmodernist curricula like the National Curriculum Statement (NCS). Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005:7), contend that in order to prepare teachers for an ever-changing world, the most important goal is to help them become adaptive experts.

Keywords: Teacher education, critical reflective practice, postmodernism, adaptive experts.

1. Introduction

The implementation of the post apartheid national curriculum in South Africa has been problematic, as indicated by the Curriculum 2005 (C2005) review committee (Chisholm, 2005:94). After the review committee released its findings and recommendation, adaptations were made and the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) was promulgated, based on the same principles and philosophy as the C2005. Yet, implementation challenges persisted (Gouws and Dicker, 2007:246; Lessing and Witt 2007:53. One reason could be that most of the teachers in the current system were trained to implement teacher-centered, state-controlled curriculum content and non-progressive education (Easton, 2008:755). However, the post-apartheid curriculum and policies embrace learner-centered and progressive education where teachers are expected to train learners for high-order thinking, problem solving, and independent learning (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005:2). Teachers can only achieve this if they themselves have been trained in such paradigms, including critical reflection. Teacher education is now faced with the task of training teachers to transform education in line with new policy requirements. According to Kruss (2008:17) it is not easy for teacher educators, as developing new programs within a rapidly restructuring institutional environment and shifting policy contexts complicates the process. She adds that even teacher educators are now required to prepare teachers to implement a curriculum which may sharply contrast with their own practice and paradigms.

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005:7), contend that in order to prepare teachers for an ever-changing world, the most important goal is to help them become adaptive experts. This implies that they should become reflective practitioners, who continuously add to their knowledge and skills and who are able to overcome the tendency of mechanistic practice (Schön, 1983:143). The knowledge and skills to do this should therefore feature strongly in
teacher education as teachers cannot teach learners to critically reflect and solve problems if they themselves do not ascribe to such practices.

2. Teacher education in South Africa (SA)

Before 1994, teacher training in SA was racially segregated creating partial, multiple and separate pathways to teacher education. By 1970, teachers were trained to promote racism and ethnic segregation at schools and received training at racially demarcated colleges (Sayed, 2004:247). Non-white teachers during this time where trained to function as state functionaries by teaching prescribed state curriculum content using officially selected textbooks (Modiba, 1999:68). It follows that classroom practices were submissive, non-critical, non-reflective and non-progressive. In 1990 curriculum debates in SA reached a critical turning point towards progressive teaching and learning (Chisholm, 2005:195). This led to the transformation from content-based apartheid school curriculum to the outcomes-based curriculum and people’s education. The change was swift and quick and teachers and teacher educators suddenly had to survive in a new curriculum world (Jansen and Christie, 1999:154). The key to this change was a shift to enabling learners to construct their own knowledge (Van der Horst and McDonald, 2002:248). This is aligned to international postmodernist education goals.

2.1. Educational reform in South Africa

Soon after its rise to power, the ANC declared its intention to reconfigure the higher education landscape (DoE, 2001). This report announced the amalgamation of historically black and white universities as well as the incorporation of teacher training colleges and/or technikons into historically academic universities (Kruss, 2008:23-24). In 1995 a national audit of teacher education at colleges indicated that the colleges were staffed by people locked into a dependency mode, shackled to external examinations for an outdated curriculum (Jaff, Rice, Hofmeyer and Hall, 1996:98). Sayed (2004:256) agreed with this move and thought that it would create strong possibilities for decisive interventions for the purposes of redress and social justice. With the placement of teacher education within universities, stricter national control over provision and standards emerged, giving rise to a national audit by the HEQC (Higher Education Quality Committee) in 2007, of all teacher education programs in SA and the findings confirmed these disparities.

As agents of change it is the teachers’ responsibility to constantly reflect on their classroom practice in search of better ways of doing things (Pudi, 2006:100). Teachers should be able and willing to reflect, challenge and refute rather than accept the status quo in order to make sense of teaching and learning in particular contexts (Scott, 2008:112-113). In doing so teachers will be shaping learners into well-informed, rational, reflective, critical choosers, and yet tolerant and compassionate human beings (DoE, 1997:9-10; Kuhn and Creel, 2006:279). For Quicke (1999:281), a democratic educationalist, postmodernism offers verification of the elitist cultural forms, the deconstruction of bureaucracy, and the opening of space for new voices. Durst, (2006:115) adds that critical pedagogy is dialogical: it involves humility, reciprocal learning and anti-authoritarian practices.

2.2 Postmodernism and teacher education

The implication of the postmodernist approach to education is that every learner and classroom is unique and needs to be managed differently. A teacher therefore may have an array of knowledge and skills which may or may not work in practice in a given context. This is typical of the classrooms in SA where the diversities include race, culture, ethnicity, socio-political, socio-economic, and intellectual diversity. Teachers therefore need to be prepared to cope and adapt to challenges that are likely to emerge. Kunje (2002:3-4), highlighting the aspirations of education stakeholders for teachers, warns that they are expected to have an array of methodology, while Bourner (2003:267) highlights the key role that reflection plays in experiential learning, in the development of reflective practitioners and in the acquisition of subject knowledge. By implication Higher Education (HE) institutions have to respond to what Lyotard has termed the postmodern condition (Raschke, 2003:1). Lifelong learning is a
predictable response to global change and teachers need to be lifelong learners to survive changing policy and contextual needs (Preston and Dyer, 2003:14).

3. Understanding critical reflection in the context of teaching and learning

Osterman and Kottkamp (1993:19), define reflective practice as a powerful means for educational change. This will allow them to constantly improve their classroom practice as it promotes autonomous learning that aims to develop critical thinking skills (UKCLE, 2007:1). Reflective teachers see themselves as agents of social change who promote liberatory education (Katz, 2008:42). This is what SA needs as a new democracy. In general reflection is a form of thinking that involves thoughtful and deep consideration of professional and practical knowledge through which to interpret and organize their environment (Rossouw, 2008:236 and Schön, 1987:23). This skill will allow teachers in SA to interpret and organize the new curriculum in a meaningful way instead of simply implementing without thinking of the unique context that they find themselves. When reflection becomes continuous and automatic it results in a spontaneous intuitive performance of a competent professional functioning in a complex environment and given its history, SA certainly has complex environments including poor resources, eleven official languages and the lack of proper teacher training. Teachers’ depth or level of reflection varies from non-reflective to highly reflective and Vallie (1993:39) suggests that teacher education programs should focus on reflective teaching and learning. He adds that telling them what to do is indoctrination but allowing reflection on moral, ethical and social issues emphasizes ethical reflection.

3.1 Benefits of reflective practice for teachers

According to Parsons and Stephenson (2005:97), it helps teachers to understand their own behavior, as they develop a greater awareness of their actions and the theories that determine their strategies which allow teachers to understand why they do what they do. This is particularly important for teachers in SA as they are no longer expected to simply teach the syllabus without first understanding and interpreting it, unlike during apartheid. It was also found that teachers have a better relationship with learners than non-reflective teachers (Killen, 2009:114). With most teachers in SA having very low esteem and job satisfaction this skill can provide them with tool to improve their environments. Teaching practice (TP) is a vital part of all teacher education programs in SA. Killen, 2009:270) adds that reflection in TP contributes to teachers taking responsibility for their own professional development, respond to changing contextual needs and it is a moral endeavour. Killen (2009:116) adds that whatever the motive, it is likely that reflective teachers will devote more time and effort to critical review and analysis of classroom teaching and learning which will remove the technocratic mind set to teaching and learning. This allows teachers to make sense of classroom experiences. Pedro (2005:63) adds that it is a tool which teachers can use to monitor their own behavior and make changes to improve teaching and learning. As much as there are benefits to implementing critical reflective practice there are also some challenges.

3.2 Challenges of implementing critical reflective practice

According to Killen, (2009:121) there are some common barriers to reflection and reflective practice as mentioned in Table 1.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common barriers to reflection</th>
<th>Ways of meeting the challenges</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beginning teachers may be so preoccupied with the subject matter, or with the delivery of the lesson that they have little time to consider how well it is going.</td>
<td>Prepare thoroughly so that you are confident of your knowledge and are clear about the structure of the lesson. Use a clear lesson plan to guide your teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning teachers may be reluctant to be self-critical at a time when they are lacking</td>
<td>Don’t expect to be perfect. But do acknowledge that you need to improve. Deliberately try to</td>
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in self-confidence and they are fearful of failure and their vulnerability.

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<tr>
<th>Beginning teachers’ may lack the knowledge of diverse teaching strategies that might help them to perceive alternatives to their current practice.</th>
<th>Learn from your mistakes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk to other teachers’ about how they teach. Ask for advice. Observe other teachers’. Look for ideas on the internet. Be prepared to take risks and step outside your comfort zone.</td>
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<th>Inexperienced teachers’ may have a very limited number of frames or experience within which to consider their teaching.</th>
<th>Practise deliberately looking at situations from more than one perspective. Try to look at your teaching through the eyes of your learners. Take de Bono’s advice and change thinking hats.</th>
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| Many teacher education students want recipes to help them to develop patterns of appropriate teacher behaviour (ways of dealing with everyday classroom events) so that they can react in fixed ways. | Don’t expect to be able to deal with similar events in the same way. Be flexible. Deliberately try to develop your skills at reflecting-in-action. |

In addition to the above, the fact that reflective thinking and inquiry are highly academic activities implies that teachers may still need to develop the necessary skills required to understand the concept given the history of teacher training as explained earlier. Massification of the HE institutions is another challenge (McLean, 2006:37).

### 4. Conclusion

The literature reviewed above creates a picture of the kind of teachers that are needed to survive changing policy, society and classroom challenges specifically in SA. It also shows clearly that if teacher are to meet these expectations, then teacher education programs must start to include the conceptual frameworks, skills and knowledge for critical reflective classroom practice from the onset of the training program, as the implementation of such complex competencies takes time and practice.

### References


