

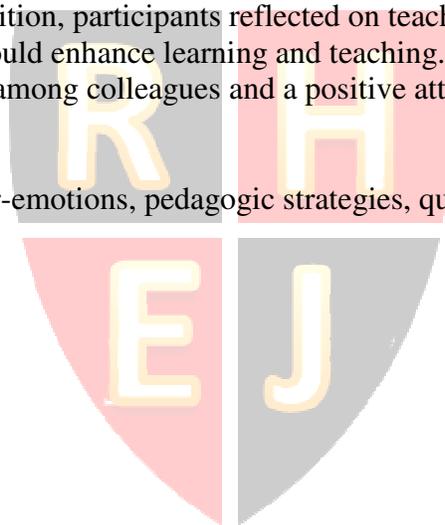
Reflective experiences of Post Graduate Certificate in Education students during teaching practice

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Abstract

Reflective teaching has become a focus of interest and a powerful movement in teacher education. The complexity of teaching requires teachers to question their practices for their own professional development in order to improve and to increase learner performance. This article aims at investigating student teachers' reflective experiences during teaching practice period. A qualitative inquiry was used in the study. Eight student teachers enrolled for a language teaching module in a one year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) initial teacher education programme for intermediate phase was randomly selected to participate in the study. Data were obtained through interviews. It became clear from the data that reflective teaching is a challenge to student teachers, as a results they could not acknowledge their shortcomings in their classroom performance. In addition, participants reflected on teaching methods and teaching media and believe that these could enhance learning and teaching. It is also the view of participants that collaboration among colleagues and a positive attitude could enhance teachers' reflective practices.

Keywords: pre-service, teacher-emotions, pedagogic strategies, qualitative research, attitudes, collaboration.



Introduction and background

Reflective teaching is a significant element in student teachers' initial training programme. It has also been widely acknowledged by many researchers as an approach that could promote teachers' professional development and improves the quality of teaching and learning. Jacobs, Vakalisa and Gawe (2011:60) contend that reflective teaching offers teachers the opportunity to renew their practice and to understand the effects of their teaching. They further state that reflective teaching provides information on how teachers connect with learners meaningfully thus promoting sound teaching and learning practice.

Killen (2007:100) states that:

Reflection helps teachers to appreciate that they too can be producers of educational knowledge because through their careful consideration of their learning and teaching experiences they can develop insight that will help them and their colleagues to better understand teaching and learning.

The above quote suggests that through reflective practice teachers can contribute to the body of knowledge regarding teaching and learning. It also stresses collaboration among colleagues so that they can assist one another to improve their practice. In addition, reflective teaching enables teachers to take charge of their own development.

Akbari (2007:192) suggests that reflective teaching will make teachers question clichés that they have learned during their formative years and will also enable them to develop more informed practice. Teachers will integrate the knowledge they have gained during pre-service training with their practical experiences and make informed choices based on the situations they find themselves in. As Braun and Crumpler (2004:61) suggest, those who do not reflect upon their practices will be likely to teach as they were taught and thus ineffective teaching strategies will be replicated. Therefore, reflective teaching assist teachers in refining their beliefs and theories about teaching as they will relate what they knew and learned to their practical experiences. Killen (2007:98) maintains that unless teachers understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, there is little chance that their efforts will result in student learning or that their actions will be morally and ethically appropriate. This suggests that reflection will improve practice if teachers learn from it.

Reflective teaching has been defined and interpreted in numerous ways, from a variety of point of view, by various researchers and groups. This paper will adopt the following definition of reflective teaching as Jacobs et al (2011:56) advocate: "reflective teaching is a continuous cycle of systematic self- evaluation by a teacher of his/her own teaching through open discussion with colleagues or written analysis". This suggests that reflective teaching is a deliberate, planned and a collaborative effort. Teachers are expected to work together and not in silos for effective teaching and learning.

The South African Department of Education (DoE) has embarked on the intensive training of teachers since the dawn of democracy in 1994. According to the DoE (2011:20) quality education is still an elusive concept in the country as teachers still lack the professional qualities that would enable them to function effectively in the classroom. This article argues that teachers as agents of change need to reflect on their teaching practices so as to learn from their previous experiences. Teachers need to question their practices and be open to different possibilities in their teaching experiences. It should be noted that teachers can question their practices if they know how. Yang (2009:11) indicates that critical reflection does not come naturally to most teachers, therefore appropriate opportunities for reflection should be provided

to student-teachers. This suggests that reflectivity is a skill that needs to be acquired by learning and not by automatic occurrence.

Research has been conducted on reflective teaching as an essential part in teachers' professional development, (Griffiths 2000; Killen 2007; Akbari 2007; Conley, De Beer, Dunbar-Kriege, Du Plessis, Gravett, Lomofsky, Merckel, November, Peterson, Robinson & Van der Merwe 2010; Jacobs 2011). Little has been done to investigate student teachers' reflective experiences during teaching practice. Griffiths (2000:545) argues that reflection is taken for granted rather than being made explicit. There is an assumption that student teachers will automatically reflect on their practices. This article is a contribution on the discourse on reflective practice in an initial teacher education programme. It also aims at suggesting strategies that could assist student teachers to become reflective teachers.

A qualitative enquiry was used for the research and data were collected through interviews. The participants were students from the University of South Africa (Unisa). These participants enrolled for a language teaching module in a one-year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), which is an initial teacher education programme for intermediate phase. This study is structured as follows: the first part gives the introduction and conceptualisation of reflective teaching. This is followed by the theoretical framework, research question, research design and methods, findings and discussions. Lastly, the conclusions and recommendations will be presented at the end of the study.

Theoretical frameworks

The changing demand and responsibilities placed on teachers requires them to be reflective in order to respond appropriately to their changing circumstances (Killen 2007:98). The importance of reflective teaching in South African context is encompassed by the Norms and Standards for Educators (Department of Education 2000). The Norms and Standards for Educators' policy acknowledge that teachers need to take charge of their personal and professional development. In addition, the Norms and Standards for Educators require teachers to have 'reflective competence'. Killen (2007:99) defines reflective competence as the ability to integrate performance with decision-making and understanding, and adapting to change unforeseen circumstances. Furthermore, Killen (2007) adds that this would not be possible if teachers have not mastered the ability to reflect on their practices. Teachers need to constantly make decisions and adapt their teaching to suite the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms. Reflective thinking involves the notion that learning and teaching requires use of multiple strategies to accomplish a particular goal. Therefore, there is need for teachers to acknowledge that the method or strategy that they use in the classroom represents one of the different strategies available to assist them to accomplish their teaching-learning goals. Killen (2007:94) contend that any approach to teaching or reflection that does not acknowledge that other approaches have some merit is dangerous. It should be mentioned that no approach is an end but a means to achieve learning outcomes.

Schön (1983; 1987) identified two approaches to reflective practice, namely reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection on-action can be defined as the self-evaluative thinking that teachers engage in after most lessons. Killen (2007:96) regards reflection on- action as a deliberate attempt by the teacher to understand past events in order to shape future actions. According to Conley et al (2010:5) reflection-in-action-refers to reflection while one is engaged in practice. They refer to this reflection as 'self-talk' because the teacher is silently and

continuously engaged in reflective process while teaching. This means that teachers question what they are doing, why they are doing it and the impacts on their learners. Killen (2007:96) maintains that for teachers to reflect in practice they must be able to frame problems almost subconsciously, generate hypotheses and immediately test them. Killen (2007:96) reiterates that both approaches to reflection involve framing and reframing problematic situations and the difference is that they occur at different times.

Jacobs et al (2011:59) reiterate that reflective teaching is a process that begins with teaching, choosing one aspect of the lesson that you want to investigate, describe that part in detail, ask yourself why the chosen event happened, reframe events in the light of several theoretical framework, ask yourself what you could have done differently, plan what needs to be done in the next light of analysis and start all over again. The reflective processes as advocated by Jacobs et al (2011:59) are presented in figure 1 below:

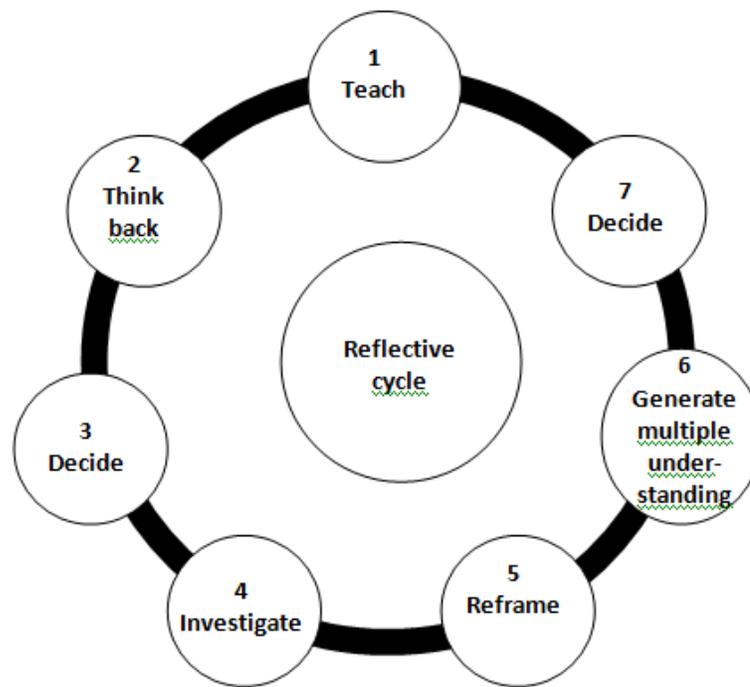


Figure 1: Reflective cycle
Adapted from Jacobs et al (2011:59)

Research question

The aim of this study was to investigate student teachers reflective experiences during teaching practice. The study will be guided by the following research question: What are the student teachers reflective experiences during teaching practice?

Research methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to facilitate entry into the participants’ life-world and to explore their life-experiences or understanding the phenomena from the participants’ perspective. As Yates (2004:157) points out, qualitative research is concerned with

the perspectives of the participants. This involves how participants understand the social world and what meaning it has for those that are under study.

Sampling

Twenty students were allocated to me to supervise during the teaching practice session of February to December 2011. Eight student teachers from the University of South Africa (Unisa) enrolled for a language teaching module in a one-year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). This PGCE is an initial teacher education programme for intermediate phase where student teachers were randomly selected to participate in the study. Random sampling method was used in this research to ensure that all the respondents stood the chance of being selected to participate in the study (Mertens 1998:314). This method was also used for convenience as the researcher was visiting students doing their teaching practice at that time. In addition, random sampling allows the researcher to generalise the results beyond the immediate group studied. Student teachers were expected to do ten weeks teaching practice in the schools of their choice. The participants were expected to reflect on their teaching experiences during their teaching practice period. These participants were asked questions such as:

1. What is your impression about the lesson?
2. What would you do differently if you were to teach the same lesson all over again?

Data collection instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to gain a detailed picture of participants' experiences of reflective practice during their teaching practice. Reflective teaching involves teaching and providing answers of why certain events happened through the use of the theoretical frameworks to back up the decisions that had been taken. Semi-structured interviews allow more flexibility and the researcher is able to make a follow up to particular interesting avenues that can emerge in the interview (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport 2011:351). Because the primary data of qualitative interview are verbatim accounts of what transpires in the interview sessions a tape recorder was used to record the interviews. Permission was obtained from the participants to record the interviews on a tape recorder. Neuman (2006:450), states that recording ensures completeness of the verbal interactions and provide material for reliability checks. Student teachers had to present a lesson and were interviewed after that.

Data Analysis

After data was collected, it was analysed and interpreted. Qualitative analysis process used in this article involved data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman 1984:10). Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the data that appear in written-up field notes or transcriptions, Miles and Huberman (1994:10). This occurs continuously throughout the life of the research project. Data display involves organising information to facilitate drawing of conclusions.

Ethical considerations

Confidentiality and anonymity

Participation in this study was confidential and anonymous. Participants were told that the information they will share will only be treated with confidentiality.

Informed consent

Participation was voluntary and participants signed a consent form. Participants were also told that they can withdraw from participating if they wish to do so. According to Hakim (2000:143) written informed consent becomes a necessary condition rather than a luxury or an impediment. All the participants signed a consent form containing detailed information of the study.

Information

Participants were informed of what the data will be used for and were also clarified on why their participation was important.

Results and discussion

The data collected were consolidated and categorized into themes. Four themes were identified namely: contentment, attitudes towards reflection, use of teaching media and teaching methods.

Contentment

It is evident from the results that participants were satisfied about their lessons; and this indicates that learners actively participated during the lesson. It should be noted that participants regarded the learners' participation as a proof that the lesson went well and that learning has occurred. Loughran (2002), cited in Akbari (2007:195), states that instead of looking for new possibilities and solutions, teachers will try to rationalize their practices and justify the way they teach. Most participants did not acknowledge what they brought to the learning process. They were happy with learners' participation and did not indicate how they have contributed in ensuring that the learning outcomes are met or they accomplish their goal. They did not indicate what they have done to get full learner participation. The following are responses of some of the participants about contentment:

1. I felt that the lesson was interesting to my learners because they were cooperating, everything went according to plan. I feel more confident than I had hoped for. The lesson went smoothly and without hitches.
2. The lesson was of a satisfactory standard, I would not change a thing.

3. I have been able to incorporate learners' prior knowledge in the lesson. This made them active during the lesson also, they participated fully I enjoyed working with them. Most of them seem to be enjoying the lesson.
4. I am very happy about the lesson, I made learners participate and follow the lesson successfully. It went well. Learners enjoyed the game that they played.

Only one participant indicated that he was able to incorporate learners' prior knowledge during lesson presentation. According to Jacobs et al (2011:217) learning can be meaningful when the information and examples that the teacher presents link up with the learner's previous experiences in a particular field. Teachers need to use what learners know as a starting point and expand that knowledge during lesson presentation.

Akbari (2007:195) indicates that the identification of a problem is not an automatic process, and there are many instances where teachers are not able to see what is wrong with their classroom performance. He adds that problem identification needs a "trained eye" which many teachers lack, especially the novice ones. One can argue that teachers need to be trained to be engaged in critical analysis of their lesson presentations which will lead to improving their practice.

Attitudes towards reflection

The success of all techniques in reflective teaching is dependent on attitudes (Jacobs et al 2011:58). They contend that teachers need attitudes of open-mindedness and whole-heartedness so that they are able to question their own and other teachers' beliefs and practices. They further argue that creation of awareness is the first step towards being a reflective teacher. Teachers need to acknowledge their shortcoming and be prepared to learn from their mistakes. According to Akbar (2007:195) there is no guarantee that teachers who have gone through reflective schemes will teach differently. However, with positive attitude and the preparedness to learn from past experiences, teachers can improve their practice. Teachers need to appreciate the fact that it does not mean they are incompetent or are "bad teachers" if they acknowledge that there were some mistakes in their lesson presentations. It takes courage and self-introspection to accept that teaching is an art that needs to be perfected on a continuous base regardless of one's previous teaching experiences.

Participants were asked what they will do differently if they could teach the same lesson all over again. This was done to give them the opportunity to thoroughly engage in their performance and see if there is any part that needs to be altered. Their responses are presented below:

1. Nothing, I am absolutely happy with the way I have presented the lesson. I believe there is no better way of doing it, I have outdone myself. I am absolutely satisfied and happy with my lesson.
2. I am satisfied with the lesson and will not change a thing if I am to do it again.
3. The lesson was good.

It is evident from the interviews that participants could not recognize that there are other possibilities of doing things and that the way they conducted their lessons is not "the" only way; for example, one participant said: "I have outdone myself". Teachers put a ceiling on their capabilities and do not create a room for exploring other possibilities for lesson presentation. One could argue that participants did not want to critique their own practice. According to Jacobs et al (2011:58) teachers need attitude of open-mindedness and whole-heartedness so that they can be able to question their practices. Killen (2007:93) points out that no matter how well you

teach there is always room for presentation improvement. This suggests that teachers need to be open to possibilities. However, open mindedness requires positive attitude and ability to acknowledge that there are alternatives and that a teacher is a life-long learner.

In addition, the above utterance indicates that reflective practice is a challenge to participants because they do not have the necessary strategies to use when they are engaged in reflective practice. According to Killen (2007:99) further states that reflection will not be possible if students have not mastered the ability to reflect on their practices. Therefore, student teachers need training on how to reflect as well as the assistance from other individuals such as colleagues to help them to identify defects in their teaching. Weber (1999), cited in Jay and Johnson (2002), argues that reflecting alone increases the possibility of reconstruction of ideas with our own bias. Teachers need colleagues who will work with and assist them in the progressing through the processes of reflective practice.

Use of teaching media

A teacher need to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning and stimulate learners' curiosity and thinking, Conley et al (2010:128). They add that the teacher needs to bring the remote world out there into the classroom. This can be done through the use of teaching media. Jacobs et al (2011:215) defines teaching media as an object the teacher uses or one that is given to learners to use, to achieve specific teaching and learning outcomes. They add that the use of teaching media places the learner in a better position to use all their senses during learning thus creating the opportunity for learners to become actively involved in the learning process. Conley et al (2011: 128) emphasizes this learning process in that children can discover things through touch, taste, smell, listening and seeing. Teaching media does not replace a teacher, but they enhance learners understanding and motivation. As Jacobs et al (2011:221) mentions teaching media must serve a definite purpose in the lesson and contribute to achieving the lesson outcome. The statements below capture their utterances regarding teaching media as a tool that could improve their lessons:

1. Bring teaching aids to the classroom to enhance learning and teaching. Media helps learners to be part of the lesson. Give more practical work in the lesson and make the lesson interesting.
2. Have a practical assignment where children make their own clocks using cardboards.
3. I will use the chalkboard as well as doing the slide show to demonstrate the use of prepositions.
4. I should have encouraged learners to use the dictionary to check for words they did not understand.

The results of the study show that teachers' main concern was the use of teaching media. They indicated that the use of teaching aids could have improved and made learning interesting in the learning process. Participants indicated that they could have also used dictionaries to assist learners to understand concepts. As Conley et al (2011:128) media plays an important role in acquiring concepts. Learners learn easily when they are presented with tangible things to assist them to understand what they are being taught.

Teaching methods

A teaching method is a procedure or a way of teaching in accordance with a definite plan, such as lecturing, questioning or discussing, Jacobs et al (2011:156). This definition suggests that teaching methods need to be planned and varied according to the purpose of the lesson.

Therefore, a teacher needs to alternate his/her teaching methods to suite the purpose of the lesson. There are two categories of teaching methods, namely the teacher-directed and the learner-centred methods. The teacher-directed method is defined by Killen (2007:108) as a method in which the teacher delivers academic content in a highly structured format, directing activities of learners and maintaining academic achievement. An example of teacher-directed methods includes the telling method and/or questioning method; whereas the learner-centred method relates to activities such as experimentation, role play and/or discussion. The quotes below represent participants' utterances regarding the use of varying teaching methods to improve their lessons:

1. I would allow learners to give more examples of prepositions as well as encourage the learners to create sentences using more than one preposition. The use of slides could have helped other learners to see how prepositions are used as some of them appear to be a bit lost.
2. Read less and allow learners to read and do cooperative learning method.
3. Use power point presentation to show them the different format of letters, both formal and informal letters.

The results show that participants believe that varying their teaching method could enhance learners understanding and participation. In addition, the above utterances suggest that participants were using the teacher-directed method of teaching instead of learner-centred method. Participants occupied the centre stage during teaching and directed most of the activities. However, they indicated that they should have used methods that are learner-centred such as a cooperative learning method. Killen (2007:194) indicates that the cooperative learning method teaches students to be less reliant on the teacher and more reliant on their own abilities to think, but seek information from other sources and learn from other students. Cooperative learning method would make learners responsible for their own learning and also stimulate the feeling in them that they too can contribute towards achieving the lesson goals.

It is also evident from the results that participants believe that visual presentation through the use of PowerPoint presentation would have added value to their learners learning experiences. This is supported by Jacobs et al (2011:166) that electronic devices can captivate a class and keep learners focused during the presentation. They further indicate that PowerPoint presentations can give a tremendous boost to learners' enjoyment of the lesson and appeal to learners' sense of adventure as they create a sense of being in a cinema. Visual presentation increases learners' motivation.

The above discussions suggest that participants acknowledge that they can use different teaching methods to achieve the lesson outcome. This is an indication that reflection is taking place even though at a lower level as they do not indicate their theoretical frameworks that inform their decisions. Larrivee (2008:342) regards this stage as pre-reflection stage. Also, Larrivee (2008:342) indicates that teachers operating at this level at this level focus on strategies and methods used to reach predetermined goals. Participants' reflections were not based on their theoretical framework as their reference for making decisions about their lessons.

Conclusions

The changing demand and responsibilities placed on teachers requires them to be reflective in order to respond appropriately to their changing circumstances (Killen 2007:98). Reflectivity is a complex process that requires student teachers to be adequately prepared to question their actions and change. It is evident that participants had a challenge with reflective teaching. They could not see problems in their teaching. However, they acknowledged that the use of teaching media and variety of teaching methods could enhance their teaching practice. Therefore, positive attitudes on the part of student teachers would assist to ensure that they remain open to learning possibilities to improve their practice. Collaboration among colleagues could also enhance student teachers reflective practices as they will share their experiences and problems during lesson presentation. Teachers' deliberate testing and questioning of their practice will assist them in getting a deeper and broader understanding of their practice and enrich their personal theories of teaching and learning.

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