

Scaffolding or Stifling? The influence of journal requirements on students' engagement in reflective practice

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This study aimed to examine student teachers' opinions of changes to reflective practice requirements during a five-week teaching practice placement as part of a one-year postgraduate initial teacher education programme. The results highlighted that prior to the changes, students saw little relevance in the reflective writing requirements while on teaching placement. Students saw the new requirements as more beneficial as they provided them with more time to reflect and greater opportunities to explore issues relevant to their professional development. Teacher educators need to consider carefully the reflective practice requirements of professional placements in order to ensure that they foster critical reflection and that they are not seen by students as mandatory paper exercises.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, teacher education; reflective journal; student teachers; professional placements

Introduction

Reflective practice has become a central part of teacher education programmes in many countries (Marcos, Sanchez & Tillema, 2009; Bolton, 2005; Humphreys & Susak, 2000). However, reflective practice is a contested concept. On the one hand much of the focus on reflection in teacher education is based on the assumption that it will bring about changes in teachers' professional practice during the course of their careers (Griffiths, 2000). On the other hand, the key element is seen as increased understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning.

This study aimed to examine student teachers' opinions of changes to reflective practice requirements during a teaching practice placement as part of a one-year postgraduate initial teacher education programme in the Republic of Ireland. It aimed to identify the issues they chose to reflect on and to investigate their perceptions of the value of the amended reflective writing requirements.

Reflective practice

The term reflective practice is open to many different interpretations. Zeichner and Liston (1996) assert that the divergent interpretations are a reflection of the various conceptions of reflective practice and the traditions in which these have emerged. These traditions emphasise different aspects of teachers' thinking ranging from thinking about content (academic tradition), teaching strategies (social efficiency tradition), students' needs and abilities (developmentalist tradition), the role of education developing a just society (social reconstructionist tradition) and general reflection on their teaching (generic tradition). Despite the broad range of meanings

given to the concept (Marcos et al, 2009; Horgan, 2005), reflective practice appears to have a number of potential benefits for teachers. They include the potential to broaden the perspective of the individual, to solve problems and to challenge the status quo. Bolton (2005, p. 4) states that it can 'take us out of our narrow range of experience and help us to perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints'. It is also seen as an effective tool in resolving unique and complex problems that arise in practice (Loughran, 2002; Bartelheim & Evans 1993). A key issue for some is the potential for reflective practice to move beyond both insight and problem solving into the wider sphere: Pedro (2005) and Halliday (1998) believe that the use of reflection in teacher education programmes has the potential to challenge the traditional, normally behaviourist views of teacher education programmes and can also help in counteracting the influence of technicism.

The danger is that some student teachers may see it as a way of solving immediate problems without critically reflecting on their practice. Bolton (2005) argues that 'reflective practice can fall into the trap of becoming only confession' (p. 5) and instead of critically examining practice, can be instead a conforming mechanism. Brookfield (1995) importantly points out that reflection in itself is not necessarily critical, in the sense that it may ignore the wider context including issues of social justice. Harrison, Lawson and Wortley (2005) argue that the critical dimension means more than simply being knowledgeable and involves a challenge to existing thoughts, schema and attitudes. This is supported by Jay and Johnson (2002) who claim that 'critical reflection involves taking in the broader historical, socio-political, and moral context of schooling' (p.79).

Critics have cautioned against the ‘wave of euphoria’ (Horgan, 2005, p. 33) that embedded reflection as a key aspect of teacher. Several observers assert that there is little evidence that engaging in reflective practice results in better teacher performance or improved student learning (Akbari, 2007; Cornford, 2002). A further danger, as Cornford (2002) suggests, is that the lack of empirical evidence seldom stifles the ideology that justifies the use of reflective practice. Akbari (2007) asserts that it also can be used to justify practices rather than addressing ineffective teaching.

Reflective writing in teacher education: potential and problems

Introduced in the 1980s, portfolios and journals are commonly used at different stages in teacher education programmes to facilitate reflective practice. At first glance portfolios and journals may appear to be based around very different concepts. Portfolios represent growth and learning over time, provide opportunities for choice in the selection of artefacts to be included, and are an alternative form of assessment (Wade & Yarborough, 1996). The artefacts range from narrative statements of teaching goals and philosophies to sample pupil assessments (Zeichner & Wray, 2001).

The journal, on the other hand, has historical links to travel diaries in the nineteenth century, to diaries written for spiritual or religious purposes and also to highly personal and self-revelatory accounts such as those of Carl Jung and Anais Nin (Moon, 1999). In the field of teacher education, it may be used as a form of self-directed professional inquiry “as an opportunity to pause, reflect, reenergize” (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 49); it may be used to develop socio-political awareness (Moon, 1999); it may be a way of enhancing personal and professional development (Sutton

et al, 2007); it may provide feedback about teaching and learning in workshops, and about classroom experiences during placements (Hume, 2009).

The vast majority of literature relating to both the portfolio and the journal highlights the importance of reflective practice within both types of writing. The portfolio is seen as a tool for reflecting on learning (Chetcuti; 2007; Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005; Darling, 2001; Wade & Yarborough, 1996; Loughran & Corrigan, 1995). Pavlovich (2007, p. 284) sees reflection as a key element of journal writing, helping the writer “to stand outside the experience, to see it more objectively, and to become detached from the emotional outcomes”. According to Chitpin (2006, p, 74), journal writing is “a vehicle for understanding oneself as a teacher”. Moon (1999, p. 4) sees the learning journal as “essentially a vehicle for reflection”.

Benefits of reflective writing for the student teacher include the provision of space to reflect (Lee 2007), a permanent record of thoughts and experience and a safe outlet for personal concerns (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). However, despite these benefits, the use of journals may in fact inhibit the reflective process and limit its value when the student is primarily concerned about its assessment rather than the value of the reflection for their professional and personal development (Pavlovich, Collins & Jones, 2009; Bolton, 2005; Smith and Tillema, 2003). Orland Barak (2005) comments on students’ tendencies to present a favourable image of themselves and questions whether mandated portfolio writing is always conducive to critical reflection. This concern is shared by others who comment on the influence of the intended audience on the student’s reflection (Poulou, 2007; Hobbs, 2007; Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005). Other problems arise when students’ writing ability prevents them

from articulating their reflections or when students fail to reflect the depth of understanding and insight gained.

Research Context

The research was conducted in a university in the mid-west region. The University, one of the largest providers of post-primary teacher education in the state, provides undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programmes. The one-year postgraduate teacher education programme is the focus of this research. Ninety students were enrolled on the programme in the 2008/9 academic year.

Through lectures and tutorials students are introduced to reflective practice prior to the start of their teaching placement. The role of the teacher as reflective practitioner is central to all teacher education programmes in the institution. The reflective writing requirements are seen as a way of helping students to reach a greater understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning and to improve planning and practice in future lessons. Reflective writing is presented as an integral part of the planning cycle. Students are encouraged to use their reflections to explore beyond immediate planning needs to the broader social and political influences.

During the programme students undertake two school-based placements. In the first semester students attend a school for one day a week and are required to teach a minimum of four class periods. In the second semester students complete a five-week placement and are expected to teach up to 23 class periods per week. In the past students were required to write (200 words) reflections on each lesson taught and a longer reflection at the end of each week's teaching. While students are allowed to

choose their topic of reflection, detailed guidelines on writing these reflections are provided. These include advice on how to avoid excessively descriptive and narrative accounts and, through a series of guiding questions, how to analyse experience before attempting to apply and consolidate learning.

This model, where students write reflections on each lesson taught, has proven successful for student teachers in understanding practice. However, there was a growing concern among faculty that writing individual reflections for each lesson (up to 23 in one week) was a considerable burden. Instead of helping to deepen the students' understanding it was feared that this was inhibiting deep reflection.

It was decided that a new set of requirements for reflective writing be adopted on a pilot basis for spring 2009. Rather than writing reflections on every lesson taught, students were required to reflect on two problems/issues related to their teaching; students were still provided with the same preparation and guidelines: however it was hoped that reducing the number of reflections required would encourage critical reflection.

Research methodology

The research involved surveying the entire cohort of students after their teaching practice was completed. The project was approved by the University research ethics committee. The questionnaire, which was group administered, obtained information on the students' age, programme of study and their previous teaching experience. The main focus of the questionnaire was to investigate the issues the student teachers

examined while on placement, explore the perceived value of the reflective process and to ascertain the students' opinions on the changes.

On completion of the questionnaire students were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. Of the 59 students that completed the questionnaire, 22 agreed to participate in a focus group discussion. Fifteen students were available at the designated times and so two focus group discussions were conducted. These aimed to validate and explore in greater depth the issues that had emerged from the student questionnaires. Having analysed the data a topic guide was developed around the emerging themes. Topics discussed in both focus group discussions included the issues which students examined in their reflections, their reasons for reflecting on specific topics, the value of the reflective process and their suggested modifications to the reflective practice model used.

The questionnaire data comprised closed and open questions. These were analysed using SPSS to provide information relating to age, teaching experience and programme of study. The open-ended questions, which formed the most substantial part of the student responses, were transcribed and analysed. Conscious that the reading of any text is subject to a multitude of interpretations depending on the individual and the unique perspectives they bring to the process (Krippendorp, 2004) every effort was made to quantify the existence of issues identified and to understand the context in which they were expressed. This is particularly important where researcher bias can influence the interpretation of the data. Recurring themes and issues were coded; once completed the responses were analysed a second time to assess the accuracy of the initial interpretation of the data and to assess whether

alternative interpretations could be made in relation to the responses. The findings to emerge from the questionnaire analysis were supported by the data from the focus group discussions.

Research Findings

The student cohort

A total number of N = 59 (of the 90 enrolled) completed the questionnaire (63% female). In line with previous years' cohorts there was a broad spread of ages with a high number of recent graduates (almost 55%) between the ages of 21 and 25 (See Figure 1.1).

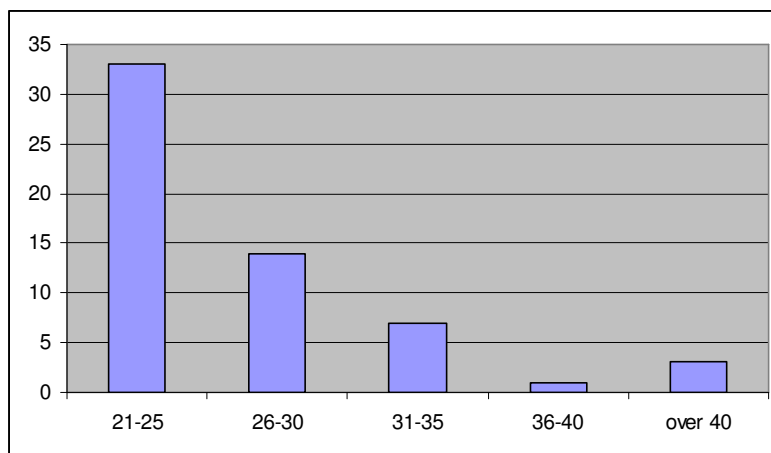


Figure 1. Students' age

Despite the relatively young age of the group a high number of the students (71%) had previous teaching experience.

What did they reflect on?

While students were free to select any issues, they were advised not to examine exclusively issues related to classroom management/student misbehaviour. Forty-three percent of students examined issues relating to dealing with student misbehaviour and classroom management. The problems ranged from dealing with individual disruptive pupils to dealing with whole-class issues. One student noted that she used their reflections to understand how to ‘maintain student focus and keep the class well behaved’. Another commented that ‘I had a very disruptive 5th year business studies group. They had no interest in learning. I had to reflect and decide how to approach teaching and learning’.

The largest number of students (52%) indicated that they examined their teaching. Trying to cater for the mixed abilities of the class group was commonly referred to and was by far the most frequently mentioned. One respondent noted that he used the reflections to experiment with different approaches to mixed-ability teaching; another noted that his class ‘had a wide range of ability from very good to struggling’. Others used the reflective component of the portfolio to explore how to address student apathy or to examine ways in which they could make course material more relevant to the students’ needs and interests:

I had a weak group of second year business studies students. [it was] very challenging! [I] had to approach teaching and learning in a different way. (Questionnaire response)

[I reflected on] student apathy and unwillingness to participate. This was very evident in music as it was very obvious when students did not engage in practical activities. I reflected on this issue with two different class groups. (Questionnaire response)

When asked to indicate how beneficial it was to reflect on the issues 49% claimed that it was very beneficial and 36% claimed it was somewhat of benefit (see figure 2.).

However it must be noted that while the students believed that it was of benefit, there was no way to determine whether their reflections contributed to solving the problems they confronted or whether they considered they had simply gained a deeper understanding of them.

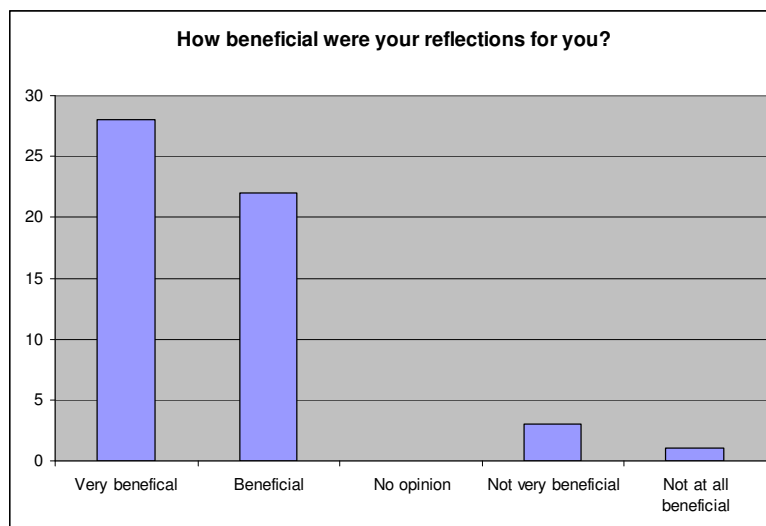


Figure 2. Benefit of reflections

Reactions to the new requirements

In the previous semester students were expected to complete an individual reflection on each lesson taught. The new requirements required them to select two issues to examine each week. These revised requirements were welcomed by the students with 81% of students believing that the new system was more beneficial to them as

beginning teachers. The students' criticisms of the original requirements focused on the repetitive nature of the process, the workload associated with writing so many reflections and the associated impact this had on preparation time for lessons. These issues emerged frequently in questionnaire responses and were also reiterated in both focus group discussions. Student questionnaire responses highlight this criticism and their support for the new requirements:

[it is] pointless writing post-lesson appraisals for every lesson - they become shallow and you're not reflecting on what you're writing about because there's too much paperwork to get through. (Questionnaire response)

I think the current system is good. . . . If more paper work was involved the workload would be too immense and enough attention would not be allocated for lesson plans and developing resources. (Questionnaire response)

The reduction in workload caused by the new changes appeared to have two significant benefits: allowing students to spend more time on planning and preparation and allowing them to reflect more deeply on the issues they confronted. Several comments from both the questionnaires and focus group discussions highlight this:

I felt if the system hadn't changed . . . the appraisals would have been so superficial from everyone. It would have just been filling out paper and because most people, they want to concentrate on preparing for the next day, and if you taking so much time out of that, I think it would . . . have suffered. (Focus group response)

The current system is much more beneficial, less timely (sic) and more realistic. It allows you to reflect on one/two key issues instead of having to think up of loads of imaginary ones!

(Questionnaire response)

Because you were doing so many [reflections] ... you would have purely stayed at the surface level and [you would] never really get down to the true understanding of what you what you were actually trying to do. (Focus group response)

The value of reflective practice

There was almost unanimous agreement (97%) that reflections were of benefit to the students. On closer analysis of the data it appeared that these reflections had four broad benefits:

- Helping students to tease out/explore issues and improve practice
- Forcing them to examine issues that they would otherwise have ignored
- Helping them to step back and gain perspective on issues
- Helping them to gain a broader understanding of schools and students

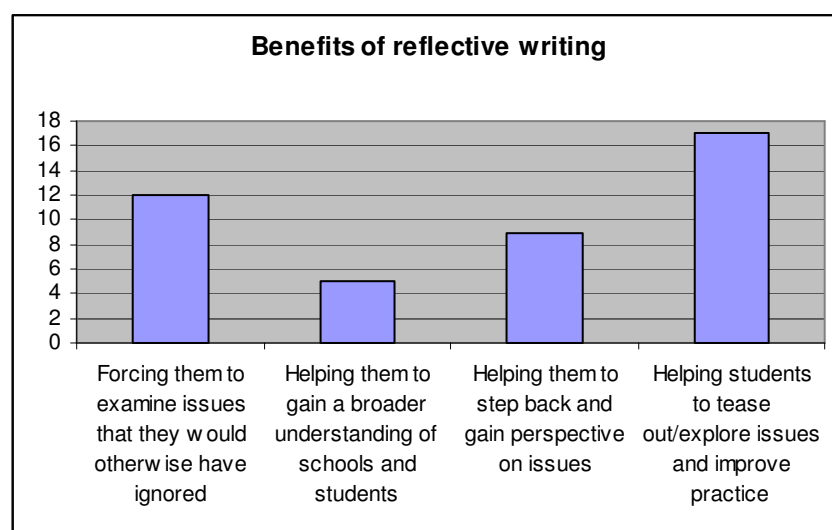


Figure 3. Benefits of reflective writing

The most common reason given by the students (mentioned in 29% of the responses) was that the reflective practice requirements helped them in exploring issues they had confronted during their teaching practice. Examples include:

It helps you to tease out any issues that arose. Writing down issues assist you to memorise (sic) anything that you had to deal with. Gives you an opportunity to articulate your experience and remember them in the future. (Questionnaire response)

It allows you to explore, examine and interpret issues and challenges that you are exposed to in the classroom and in the school. It has the effect of focusing your thoughts and how you are performing not only in class but in the whole school context. If it was not for the reflections I don't think my TP would have been as successful or effective. (Questionnaire response)

Others included a focus on improvement of practice:

It forces you to think about your teaching more which then helps improve your teaching more - without reflections many aspects of my teaching would not have improved to the degree that it did. (Questionnaire response)

It makes you think in more detail how the class went and it improves you (sic) for the future (Questionnaire response)

Students believed that the reflective journal requirements also compelled them to examine issues that they would otherwise have ignored. This was mentioned in over one fifth of student responses. Some highlighted the importance of making sense of issues:

It engaged me with issues which I would have avoided or ignored had I not had to do them, I found them insightful. (Questionnaire response)

A third issue, highlighted by 15% of the students, was that the reflective journal played an important function in providing time and space to reflect on their experiences away from the challenges and demands of the classroom and school. It would seem that students valued the opportunity to engage in reflection on action:

after coming out of four straight classes in a row, you come out and your brain's just full of stuff. You just need, once you've got it down, you have it in order, then you've room in your head to think. Whereas when everything is just going around at a hundred miles an hour, there's no way you're going to reflect or think on anything. (Focus group discussion)

Writing down their reflections appeared to give them perspective and clarity:

I suppose some things are clearer, there's more room, like you're stepping back, you've clarified everything and there's more room to think about right how do I, ideas come in then from that. You get, so maybe, I don't know, inspiration or you might, something might become more clear on paper, then suddenly, you know, something clicks and you think, oh hang on, this is going to work. (Focus group discussion)

I think it is [beneficial], even to sort it out in your head. It can be all jumbled up in your own head, but when you put it down on paper, you have to think back, clearly putting it down. It actually clears it up in your own head, I think. (Focus group discussion)

Again, some students included an emphasis on reflection leading to future action:

Gives perspective outside of the rushed and hectic atmosphere of classroom. Allows you to see beyond the immediacy of the classroom. Helps you see and act upon a particular issues more clearly. (Questionnaire response)

When you're in the classroom and you're trying to deal with the there and then, you can't get the same perspective. Whereas if you sit back and you're writing it later, you get more clarity of sort later to deal with it and you can go and draw from all your sources, like talk to whichever teacher, you know, talk to people you need to talk to, and then come back and tackle it first the next day. (Focus group discussion)

When asked to comment on the value of reflection while on teaching practice the issue least frequently mentioned was the insight and the broader understanding of schools and students gained from the reflection. This was mentioned by only five students; however, these students appear to have gained impressive insights. As one student wrote in the questionnaire, it helped her to 'become more aware of how school works as a whole'. Another student, commenting on her experience of teaching immigrant children, highlights her insights gained:

I had contact with a lot of foreign nationals ... teaching English as a second language ... a very small class that I saw nine times a week, just six of them ... I also had them in a German class, a second-year German class - I had four of them. Knowing them from the very small class getting to knowing them in a setting of 30 students, all boys, and realising the extent to which they're completely cut off. And I think that was an issue that occurred for me a few times as well, and seeing how to integrate them and to kind of try to go against the attitude of most teachers as well "sure, just leave them off in the corner". That was an issue then as well. I think that was something that was bigger than me though as well, it was bigger than something that I was ever going to resolve in six weeks. (Focus group)

Discussion

The changes implemented as part of the reflective journal requirement emerged from a concern about the lack of critical reflections. It was thought that the excessive workload of the original model, where students were required to reflect on each lesson, resulted in a focus on quantity rather than quality in the written reflections. Poulou (2007) comments that it can be difficult for student teachers to engage in reflection due to other commitments. The findings from this study showed that students certainly considered this to be the case. The new requirements have had a positive effect in this regard. The new model also appears to be of greater value for them. Within the pressure of a teaching practice placement, where lesson planning and lesson implementation are also assessed, it is perhaps not surprising that they did not find it helpful to reflect on each and every lesson.

The freedom to examine issues over a period of time was found to be beneficial. Conducting research into the factors that constrain and enhance reflection Clarke (1995) found that student teachers' reflections were thematic in nature rather than incidental or episodic. The reflections were 'extended and interwoven across multiple classroom and personal interaction contexts' (Clarke, 1995, p. 259). This may explain the value of the new model, as rather than compelling the students to reflect on individual lessons and incidents, it instead encourages reflection across multiple contexts. Despite the students' support for the new model of reflective practice, would they engage in reflective practice if it were not a requirement on teaching practice? From the student responses this seems unlikely, not because of the perceived worth of the experience, but instead perhaps because of the demands of

teaching practice and the pressure to perform. Concerns over assessment of their teaching appeared to be their primary focus as this surfaced throughout the research.

Was the students' reflection critical in nature? The issues examined by the students appear to suggest that the students saw the reflective process as primarily within the academic, developmentalist and social efficiency traditions since they appeared to use it mainly to improve their performance, improve student learning, and teach more effectively. The social reconstructionist tradition was not evident in the issues examined. It is however understandable, given the challenges of their teaching placements, and the subsequent demands to 'perform', that the student teachers would primarily use their reflections to equip themselves with 'a concrete toolbox of ideas and activities' to survive their initial induction stages' (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007, p. 958). Down and Hogan (2000) state that technical rationality discourse is strongly evident in the reflections of student teachers during their internship experience where they tend to focus on refining skills, collecting useful resources and achieving positive learning outcomes. They found that 'workshop discussions kept coming back to these practical-professional concerns despite 'efforts to introduce a more political dimension to students' enquiry' (p. 21). Hamlin (2004) maintains that students are more likely to be concerned about issues relating to social justice when they are observing teaching, rather than later on when actually teaching themselves. Bean & Stevens (2002) found that the student teachers in their study relied strongly on their own personal belief systems and did not tend to challenge existing ideologies. This is also supported by research by Pedro (2005) into how five pre-service teachers in the US constructed meanings of reflective practice, and how these meanings informed their practice. The study found that reflection was used as a conceptual device to help

them improve teaching skills, rather than explore the social and political dimensions seen as key to critical reflection as outlined by Brookfield (1995). The students' focus is perhaps also a result of the competing demands of personal 'hurt' and professional gain which students experience when completing reflective writing tasks as part of course requirements (Ghaye, 2007).

Maynard and Furlong (1993) outline five stages of development and concerns among student teachers, they include: Early idealism, Survival, Recognising difficulties, Hitting the plateau and Moving on with a concern for student learning. This framework suggests that for the majority the early idealism was replaced by the need to survive the realities of teaching. There was little evidence of reflections focusing on experimentation and concern for student learning. Given their focus on survival, is it realistic to expect student teachers to examine practice from a broader socio-political perspective?

The student teachers' level of reflection might, with more experience, progress to more critical levels as attention moves from focusing on personal adequacy to pupils' needs. However, Harford and MacRuairc (2008) maintain that there remain few opportunities in the Irish system for continuous professional development for newly qualified teachers (despite the National Pilot Project on Teacher Induction, there is presently no statutory induction for new teachers). In this light perhaps a greater emphasis on the critical aspects of reflection should be encouraged from the early stages of teacher education programmes to challenge the 'gestalts' of teaching brought by pre-service teachers to schools (Griffiths, 2000).

Ghaye (2007) raises questions concerning the ethics of expecting emotional depth in student reflections; do reflections of a critical nature raise similar ethical issues? The developmental model used in this project, which encourages a progression from descriptive to dialogic to critical levels of reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995) does not necessarily encourage or expect greater depth of personal and emotional input. However, in expecting a specific focus on critical levels of reflection, does this model stifle opportunities for greater personal and emotional engagement in the reflective process? Is it ethical for us to present a model of reflective writing that privileges social and political issues over personal concerns? These questions may play a role in widening the debate regarding how far reflective practices are ethical (Ghaye, 2007).

Conclusion

The research has revealed that, from the student perspective, coursework requirements can have a significant influence on their reflections. It was evident in the student responses that the earlier model fragmented opportunities for reflection. This resulted in short reflections on individual lessons, which, over time, became repetitive and meaningless for many. The new model appears to facilitate reflection on broader recurring themes across different class groupings.

The challenge for a model of reflective writing during a professional placement is to ensure that the process fosters critical levels of reflection. Course designers need to consider carefully the reflective practice requirements of professional placements in order to ensure that they are not seen by students as obligatory paper exercises. Reflections need to strike a balance between meeting the immediate needs of the

student teacher and also encouraging them to reflect critically on the broader social and political issues.

The task of ascertaining the students' opinions of the new reflective practice requirements has illuminated several other issues and raises questions about the very nature and purpose of the reflective component of the student teachers' placement. This research has raised more questions than it has answered. Perhaps its greatest value has been in the questioning of our existing practices in relation to reflective writing. It has also opened up a wider debate about ways of scaffolding the student teacher in reflective practice.

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