

## **Pre-Print version of Paper**

To cite: McGarr, O., McCormack, O. & Comerford, J. (2019) Peer-supported collaborative inquiry in teacher education: exploring the influence of peer discussions on pre-service teachers' levels of critical reflection, *Irish Educational Studies*, 38:2, 245-261, DOI:10.1080/03323315.2019.1576536

## **Peer-supported collaborative inquiry in teacher education: Exploring the influence of peer discussions on pre-service teachers' levels of critical reflection**

Scaffolding pre-service teachers to critically reflect on their practice remains a challenging goal. Exploring the extent to which peer discussion facilitates this critical reflection is the focus of this paper. Using a series of three linked tasks, pre-service teachers 1) reflected on a classroom incident from a vignette of practice, 2) shared and discussed their initial reflections with peers and 3) revisited their initial reflection in an attempt to unearth any assumptions they may have had. The study found that peer discussion broadened pre-service teachers' perspectives beyond the initial ego-centric reflections, which were dominated by issues of pupil management, control and discipline. The peer discussion process supported pre-service teachers in identifying and questioning some of their preconceived assumptions. However, findings indicate that the process supported pre-service teachers in acquiring greater breadth rather than greater depth in reflective thinking. We would argue that rather than seeing peer engagement opportunities as a panacea, it should be viewed as a valuable scoping exercise to unearth alternative perspectives and to begin the process of 'hunting assumptions'

**Keywords:** Reflective practice; pre-service teacher; peer discussion, hunting assumptions

## **Introduction**

Assisting pre-service teachers' in moving from simple descriptive accounts of their practices towards more critical aspects of reflection is a key goal of teacher education programmes. While reflection can take many forms, priority tends to be placed on critical levels of reflection, focusing on interrogating one's beliefs and assumptions that underpin prevailing practices (Authors, year). Such an approach to reflective practice is viewed as fundamental in teacher education, as it is perceived as a key mechanism to assist in the deconstruction of the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) and supporting pre-service teachers to hunt their assumptions (Brookfield, 1995).

Recently the use of eportfolios and other ICTs, that provide opportunities for students to interact and share their insights, are seen as ways of supporting collaborative inquiry, deepening reflection and maintaining engagement during the practicum experience (Carpenter and Krutka 2015). However, the extent to which peer-supported collaborative inquiry is simply used by pre-service teachers to affirm existing assumptions rather than challenge them is an important issue. Exploring the extent to which peer discussion influences pre-service teachers' reflections is the focus of this paper. Using a series of three linked tasks, in which pre-service teachers reflect on a pre-designed classroom scenario and share their initial reflections with a peer before subsequently reflecting on the new insights gained from the process, this study aimed to explore the impact of these peer discussions on the pre-service teachers' reflections. In particular, the analysis of the completed reflections aimed to explore the extent to which the activity assisted the pre-service teacher in reflecting more critically and in hunting the assumptions (Brookfield 1995) embedded within their original reflection on the classroom incident.

## **Reflective practice and peer learning**

Reflective practice plays a key role in teacher education and is widely accepted as an important component of teacher education (Beauchamp 2015, Clarà 2014). It has a long tradition in teacher education (Dewey 1933; Schon 1983) and as Beauchamp (2015) notes, its value has been repeatedly confirmed in the literature on teacher education. It is argued that reflecting on one's practice can aid the teacher in gaining deeper insights into their professional work and enable them to consider alternative perspectives on their practices. In Ireland, such is the extent of its perceived value, it forms part of the accreditation requirements in initial teacher education programmes where programme providers must, 'allow for the development of a more reflective, enquiry-oriented approach to the school placement and facilitate the development of the teacher as reflective practitioner' (Teaching Council 2011, 16).

Reflective practice is commonly presented as a personal process where the teacher, as an independent practicing professional, reflects on aspects of their work with a view to more deeply understanding dimensions of their practice so as to make improvements. It is also presented as more collegiate in nature; this perspective views it as a collaborative venture amongst teaching professionals. Gaining the perspectives of colleagues and peers can provide alternative perspectives on one's practice and can facilitate deeper conversations and insights about practice that may not emerge through more personal forms of reflection. As Gelfuso and Dennis (2014, 3) note, 'reflection is communal ... and takes collision with another person's horizon ... to bring into existence imaginative 'warranted assertabilities' about teaching and learning'. The centrality of collaboration is echoed by Lane et al. (2014) who see it as a shared meaning-making process.

Framed within this collaborative inquiry perspective efforts have been made to provide opportunities to engage in more shared forms of reflection (Rigelman and Ruben

2012). Buschor and Kamm (2015, 234) note that, ‘the goal of collaborative inquiry is to move towards a system of problem-solving in communities of practice that promote the development of knowledge in the practitioners’ context’. From the perspective of initial teacher education collaborative forms of inquiry and reflective practice can provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to share experiences and engage in professional conversations defending their ideas and considering other perspectives (Newell 1996). This form of collaborative inquiry, according to Parsons and Stephenson (2005, 103) also allows pre-service teachers space to, ‘step back from the pressure of preparing for the next lesson and engage in deeper thinking about events and situations’. The peer dimension of this experience also enables students to engage in professional conversations about their practice in a non-judgemental way leaving a more conducive environment for experimentation and risk taking. Increasingly, such peer collaborations (supported through the use of ICT) are also being used to address issues of isolation experienced by pre-service teachers while on school placement (Thompson-Long & Hall 2018).

As well as addressing issues of power and isolation, looking at such peer learning opportunities from a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky 1978), provide opportunities for personal meaning-making through engagement with peers and therefore have a particular value for the practicum experience (Jones and Ryan 2014). However, Moore-Ruso and Wilsey (2014) note that teachers differ in their abilities to reflect on their own and others’ teaching based on their levels of experience. In this context the application of social constructivist pedagogical experiences is not without its limitations. Hyslop-Margison and Strobel (2007) warn that without a conceptual understanding of what constructivism is it can become little more than an educational slogan and result in questionable success. For example, in classroom discussions where opinions are not

supported by evidence they argue that discussions may, ‘regress to the relativist view that one perspective is necessarily as good as another’ (Hyslop-Margison and Strobel 2007, 73) or instead can result in a dismissal and distrust of alternative perspectives without critical consideration – a form of epistemic sectarianism. In this context peer supported reflection can be, as Dewey (1938, 25) notes, miseducative, having the effect of, ‘arresting or distorting the growth of further experience’.

The role of the experienced professional in scaffolding discussions is critical in avoiding these ‘miseducative’ experiences and relativist positions as novice teachers normally have few experiences to draw from. This lack of scaffolding was evident in a study of online discussions and blogs to improve the practicum of pre-service teachers in rural Australian schools. In analysing the completed reflections, Jones and Ryan (2014) found that the pre-service teachers rarely engaged in high levels of reflection. A somewhat similar study in the UK by Parsons and Stephenson (2005), where pre-service teachers were required to work with a critical partner from their peer group and members of the school staff while on placement, revealed different findings. On completion of the block placement (an extended placement of complete immersion within the school) analysis of completed student questionnaires, in which they were asked about aspects of their placement and the related tasks, showed that the collaborative environment had helped them gain more understanding of the experience. Parsons and Stephenson further added (2005, 114) that, ‘the collaborative nature of the Block School Experience and the weekly tasks did help the students in the sample do more than simply describe their practice and they did demonstrate deeper thinking about their work in the classroom’. In differentiating the two studies above it may well be that the presence of the collaborating teacher in the process provided deeper insights which benefitted the students by assisting them in operating within their ‘zone of proximal development’ (Vygotsky 1978). The

presence of the Vygotskian concept of the ‘more knowledgeable other’ (MKO) may have provided opportunities to challenge the students’ perceptions and move discussions beyond personal concerns. With this in mind, the influence of peer discussion on pre-service teachers’ reflections is the focus of this paper. Given the increasing shift towards collaborative forms of inquiry and drawing on the work of Brookfield (1995), this study examined the impact of peer discussions and the sharing of reflections on pre-service teachers’ ability to critically reflect and unearth their assumptions.

### **Research in Context**

In Ireland, initial teacher education follows both a consecutive and a concurrent model, with strong support for the ongoing retention of both pathways of teacher formation (Coolahan 2003). The consecutive pathway is a minimum of five years in duration, with individuals firstly undertaking a three or four-year degree in an academic specialism, followed by a two-year Professional Masters in Education (PME). Those undertaking the concurrent pathway normally complete a four-year degree. Reflective practice has become a prominent feature of teacher education in Ireland, perceived as a “productive way of helping pre-service teachers become adaptable, inventive practitioners” (Leonard and Gleeson 1999, 56). This growing emphasis is seen in government publications (Department of Education and Science 1992, Department of Education 1995), the work of the professional regulatory body for teachers in Ireland (Teaching Council 2011) and accordingly is assessed formally as part of the school placement of pre-service teachers (Harford and MacRuairc 2008).

The entrants to initial teacher education, particularly those on the concurrent route, have traditionally been described as high achievers (Coolahan 2003, 21), and “more traditional than progressive” (Skipper and Quantz 1987, 41). They can be considered the success stories of a second-level system marked by the dominance of the technical

paradigm (Gleeson 2010). As a result of this technical paradigm, in which control of the learner and the learning environment are prioritised, students have limited opportunity to challenge either their own ideologies or the ideologies of others, and instead become accustomed to performing in a context bereft of a “critical intellectual tradition” (Benson et al. 1985, 16). Previous studies published by the authors (Authors 2014; Authors 2015) have found that undergraduates on the concurrent pathway have been reluctant to reflect critically on their (largely successful) experiences in second-level education

This study was undertaken in a university in the Mid-West of the Republic of Ireland. The participants consisted of 52 pre-service teachers undertaking the four-year concurrent pathway. The students reported on were in year two of this degree programme. The degree which would be awarded to these students at the end of this pathway would enable them to teach at post-primary level in one of a range of specialisms including technology, science, and physical education (with an elective). This concurrent programme can be understood as integrated, in that subject specific content, pedagogical content, educational content as well as teaching practice all form part of the programme. As part of their engagement with the education component, the pre-service teachers undertake a range of modules, including: personal development, philosophy, psychology of education, information and communication technologies in education, planning for teaching and learning, reflective practice, curriculum studies, responding to diversity in education, and professional studies.

As noted above, reflective practice plays a central role in pre-service teacher’s development in the degree programme. During year two of the programme, pre-service teachers explore reflective practice to develop their understanding, and examine ways in which reflection takes place. Data collection took place during a workshop session in a module aimed at developing this understanding.

## **Methodology**

In this study we aimed to explore the extent to which peer discussion influences pre-service teachers' perspectives and insights. In particular the study aimed to explore the extent to which this peer discussion and the sharing of one's reflections can assist students in unearthing the assumptions underpinning their initial interpretation of a vignette on a classroom incident. The overall question guiding this research was: what impact does peer discussion have on pre-service teachers' level of critical reflection and on their ability to hunt their assumptions?

### ***Participants***

The research was conducted in a teacher education programme at a University on the west coast of Ireland. The participants involved in the study were pre-service teacher education students in the second year of a four-year Bachelor's programme in post-primary teaching specialising in a range of subjects including Physical Education, Technology, Science, Mathematics, English and Geography. The average age of the participants was 20 years of age.

### ***Study design***

The study is framed largely by the interpretivist paradigm, which is interested in the interpretation and meaning people attach to an event, and acknowledges that multiple realities exist (Dumas & Anderson, 2014). As such, the authors were interested in participant's views, understanding and opinions regarding the classroom incident.

The study consisted of three related tasks conducted as part of a two-hour tutorial in the students' third semester of the programme (Year 2). The tutorial was part of a module on



classroom planning and organisation which prepared the participants for a significant school placement in the subsequent semester. The tutorial in question aimed to provide the participants with the opportunity to reflect on an assigned vignette of classroom practice individually before then discussing the vignette with their peers and hearing other perspectives. The final stage of the tutorial then provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their initial reflections in light of their peers' perspectives. It was hoped that hearing others' perspectives would help the participants to think about the assumptions underpinning their initial interpretation of the incident described in the vignette.

A number of weeks later, in one of the final lectures of the module where the data was collected, the students were briefed by a member of the research team independent of the module. The students were invited to provide written consent to allow their reflection sheets to be analysed for this study, and a total of 52 students offered their consent to participate from a total of 254 students (a response rate of 20.5%).

### ***Task details***

#### *Task 1*

In Task 1, the pre-service teachers were presented with a vignette (see Appendix 1 for detail of the vignette) and accompanying guiding questions. The vignette described the experience of a pre-service teacher, Brian, and his attempts to engage a group of 14-year-old students in his lesson. The vignette included details of a critical incident in the classroom related to student misbehaviour. Having read the vignette, pre-service teachers were firstly invited to complete an individual written reflection on the lesson from the perspective of Brian, the pre-service teacher in the vignette. The participants were provided with the following guiding questions to complete the task:

- How does Brian feel after the lesson?
- What does Brian feel contributed to the lesson?
- Whether Brian feels he should/could have done anything differently to avoid the lesson's outcome

These questions were ordered to firstly seek their emotional response to the scenario described before then encouraging a more cognitive assessment of the situation where they were invited to also think about the teacher's potential action. Question 2 and 3 in particular, aimed to explore and unearth student's preconceived ideas and assumptions regarding teaching (authors).

### *Task 2*

In Task 2, pre-service teachers were invited to engage in discussion with their classroom peers (in pairs) on their individual reflections from task 1, and were encouraged to discuss similarities and differences between their reflections and consider possible reasons for these similarities/differences. This peer discussion lasted approximately 30 minutes and was then captured in an individual written exercise entitled 'Comparing reflections'. This task was again scaffolded by guiding questions including:

- In what ways were our reflections the same/different
- Why might we have the same/different perspective(s) on this lesson?
- Has this reflection changed my account of the lesson? Why/why not? In what way?

### *Task 3*

Finally, the participants undertook Task 3 (Hunting Assumptions (Brookfield, 1995)). This task began with a whole-class discussion centred on the perspectives offered by the students and facilitated by a tutor. This whole-class discussion was then followed by an individual written task, in which students examined their original reflection (from Task 1) and attempted to uncover any assumptions they made, which led them to their interpretation. It was hoped that their interactions with their peers during the earlier tasks

would help them to critically examine their initial interpretations of the vignette. The sole question guiding this written task was, *‘Looking back at your written reflection what assumptions have you uncovered in your original reflection?’* At the end of the workshop, the students submitted their task-sheets to their workshop leaders.

### ***Data analysis***

The completed written reflections from each phase of the project formed the data for the study. Each participating student had three written submissions: one from task 1, one from task 2, and one from task three.

Two members of the research team independently analysed the responses to the three tasks. In analysing the written submissions both researchers firstly read the written responses to all three tasks in order to become immersed in the data and to identify emerging themes. Following this, two approaches to analysis were adopted.

Firstly, in terms of task 1, both researchers identified differences between the pre-service teacher’s respondents i.e. some placed blame external to the student, while others reflected, amongst other things, on the teacher’s role. Some placed emphasis on ‘control’ and ‘authority’ while others focused on such issues as pedagogical approaches and student enjoyment. We also noticed a shift in thinking in relation to these issues between task 1 and task 3. In order to capture this, we manually coded the responses to task 1 and task 3 as either being “Narrow” or “Broad” reflections. We define ‘narrow’ reflections as ones that show a low level of criticality and limited hunting of assumptions. ‘Narrow’ reflections drew on traditional perspectives of the teachers’ role. A number of studies have indicated that this is typified by exhibiting authority and control over pupils and an adherence to teacher-centred practices which have historically dominated Irish education (Sugure, 1997; Glesson, 2010; Authors 2010; Authors 2014). Narrow perspectives are

also quite ego-centric in nature, typified by displaying concerns primarily related to the self rather than others (Fuller 1969) and attributing blame to external rather than acknowledging the role of internal sources (Heider 1958).

On the other hand, 'broad' reflections portrayed greater levels of criticality and the ability of pre-service teachers to challenge their assumptions. These perspectives tended to show the opposite of the above and were less constrained by social norms in terms of what constitutes 'good' teaching and personal biases that can be self-limiting. For example, they firstly showed a greater focus on student-centred learning and less emphasis on the centrality of the teacher. They also showed evidence of an ability to view the incident in the vignette from alternative positions, i.e., evidencing less ego-centric perspectives. This, for example, is typified by showing a greater awareness of the pupils' potential interpretation of the event and drawing on a more diverse repertoire of possible reasons for the critical incident and a more diverse range of ways to rectify the situation. In addition, in these cases blame is not attributed to external sources and there is a recognition of the complex interplay between all actors in the environment, hence simplistic attribution of blame is less evident. These reflections may also have shown greater awareness of the impact of social and political factors on schooling.

Each researcher manually coded the two sets of reflections (task 1 & 3) individually, after which time they met to discuss the categorisation of each respondent. Any disagreement was discussed and negotiated between the two researchers.

The researchers then returned to all three tasks and analysed the data using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Both researchers read and re-read responses to task 1,

2 and 3 in an attempt to identify the common issues emerging. Again, the two researchers read the responses, met, discussed and agreed on the most dominant reoccurring themes within the data set.

### ***Potential limitations***

Prior to considering the findings, the limitations of the current study need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample included in this study encompassed approximately 20% of the entire cohort of pre-service teachers. The low participation rate may relate to the fact that the researcher visited a lecture near the end of the semester. Attendance at large lectures can vary particularly near the end of the semester, so a number of the cohort may have been absent. Secondly, a number of different university tutors were involved in the delivery of these tutorials and while all worked from the same tutorial plan, slight variations may have emerged due to the approach taken. Peer groups were formed in an unstructured manner. Pre-service teachers were merely asked to discuss their reflections with peers sitting next to them. This may have impacted on the discussion pre-service teachers felt comfortable engaging in. Thirdly, while the pre-service teachers engaged in reflective dialogue with their peers, what was ultimately analysed was a written account of this collaborative inquiry. The written documentation may not fully reflect the nature, tone and focus of the peer discussion. Finally, although the task and the associated questions aimed to scaffold critical reflection and to support students to hunt their assumptions, the questions may not have adequately supported this.

## Research Findings

### *Task 1: Initial reflection on the vignette of the critical incident.*

As described above, the pre-service teachers were invited to read a vignette describing a lesson and to write, individually, a personal reflection on the lesson. This personal reflection was guided by the three questions outlined in Task 1 in the methodology section.

#### *Blame shifting authoritarians*

Of the 52 initial reflections analysed, 28 (54%) presented, what we have defined as a narrow reflection on the lesson, as described in the methodology section. ‘Blame’ was frequently placed externally to the teacher. These pre-service teachers also placed an emphasis on ‘control’, ‘authority’, ‘punishment’ and ‘discipline’ in their initial reflection. These pre-service teachers felt, for example, that they *‘lost control in the classroom. Students are very disruptive therefore I am finding it difficult to get the content completed’* (Female). It was suggested that *‘maybe I should reprimand the misbehaving students by kicking them out of class or by sending them to the principal’* (Male). Additionally, these pre-service teachers felt that they *‘should have been more authoritative’* (Male) and *‘need to show the pupils that I am in control of the lesson’* (Male).

Amongst this group there was also evidence of external attribution of blame. For example, explanation for the ineffective lesson was placed on such external factors as the layout of the room and the lack of resources within it, the limited opportunities provided by the school and the teacher having to teach theoretical content as opposed to facilitating practical work.

‘The situation would not have happened if there had been an adequate number of MTW [laboratory/workshop] classrooms’ (Male)

‘God I hate having to teach the theory side of woodwork ... cutting timber keeps them all happy but once I’m in that other [theoretical] class their attention is gone’  
(Male)

They also attributed the pupils’ behaviour to internal dispositional or personality-based explanations where pupils were seen as not ‘*respecting the teacher*’. For example:

‘The students were not listening to me...I could not control the class...the boys at the back were being very disrespectful to me. The students did not stop for the whole lesson and made it very difficult for me to teach’ (Female)

‘The class reached a new low. They had no respect for me. They didn’t listen and they didn’t take notes’ (Male)

The absence of any personal attribution of behaviour from this group is noteworthy. This may suggest that in providing explanations for the unsuccessful lesson, the pre-service teachers are in parallel to blaming ‘others’, maintaining a level of self-esteem through presenting oneself in a positive light.

### ***Task 2: Comparing reflections***

Having completed their original individual reflection, the pre-service teachers were asked to discuss their initial reflections in pairs. Having done so, they completed Task 2, using three questions as a guide as outlined in the methodology section. A themed analysis raised a number of issues, as discussed below.

#### *We are all the same*

Where reflections were similar, pre-service teachers suggested that this was as a consequence of similarities between themselves and their peer. Similar experiences of schooling, similar experiences of third level education, and similar views of what it means to be a teacher were all perceived as contributing to the ‘sameness’ of the pre-service

teachers' reflections and views. For example,

As pre-service teachers we both have the same modules and have both been exposed to the same teaching and practices. This is why we both agreed on how the lesson went (Female)

As woodwork teachers we both did MTW [the subject] and both experienced a similar class while we were in school (Male)

We both have similar values and expectations of what the teacher's job is (Female)

The fact that pre-service teachers viewed both themselves and their peers as 'inexperienced' who had similar 'fears around teaching' was viewed as contributing to the similarities between the reflections i.e. '*we have both the same perspective as we are both young, inexperienced teachers*' (Male). It was suggested that as '*we were reading the same texts we were almost bound to get the same perspective*' (Male).

Where differences emerged this was largely viewed as being as a result of different experiences in school and individual pre-service teachers preferring different approaches to teaching and discipline. Hence this suggests that they appear to be indicating that their previous experience of the subject in schools is highly influential in determining how they will teach.

#### *Maintaining initial stance but acknowledging alternative perspectives*

Pre-service teachers indicated that their views, as outlined in their initial reflection, was unlikely to change within a context where their peers had similar views to their own i.e. '*this task hasn't changed my view because we both found the same flaws and we were both able to conclude the same things needed to be changed*' (Male). At times, these similarities actually reinforced particular views and perspectives. For example, '*I don't think this has changed my account. We had similar views so it made me realise that I*



*must have been on to something'* (Female).

Pre-service teachers did indicate that as a result of the activities, they had gained alternative views or a broader perspective as a result of the process. The fact that there may be *'different solutions to solve a problem and it is not just one solution'* (Female) was suggested. Another pre-service teacher explained how engagement in the process *'has raised issues and possible causes that did not occur to me and may not have had'* (Male) while another believed that it *'made me think about how I could have dealt differently with the class and maybe what other techniques I could have used'* (Male).

### ***Task 3: Hunting assumptions***

The final task as part of this study invited the pre-service teachers to revisit their initial reflection on the vignette with a view to unearthing any assumptions they may have initially had (Brookfield, 1995). This task was guided by the question: *Looking back at your written reflection, what assumptions have you uncovered in your original reflection?* The final reflections, from task 3, were analysed as described in the methodology section.

### ***Acquiring multiple perspectives***

Twenty-five of the twenty-eight reflections (89%) initially classed as 'narrow' from task 1, with an emphasis on external attribution of blame and authoritarianism, portrayed evidence of a 'broader' perspectives following engagement in the peer discussion (Task 2) and 'hunting assumptions' task (Task 3). That means that following the exercise 49 of the 52 pre-service teachers (94%) showed greater levels of criticality within their reflections. It appears that pre-service teachers began to question their initial assumptions and acknowledge the possible role and influence of the teacher in contributing to the particular learning environment and related incident. In the 'hunting assumptions' (Task 3) section of the reflective process, these pre-service teachers began to place greater focus

and emphasis on the teacher, their planning and preparation for the lesson and the teaching strategies they utilised during the lesson. For example, one pre-service teacher questioned whether *'the reason the students are acting out is that they are disinterested because my lesson is all writing and reading-based work. If the lesson was more active and engaging maybe the students would not act out'* (Female).

Pre-service teachers began to challenge their previous assumptions regarding approaches to reprimanding misbehaving students and questioned the impact negative sanctions can have on the learning environment and teacher-pupil relationship. For example, pre-service teachers questioned whether:

My initial views were focused on the authority the teacher should possess however after hearing other people's reflections maybe a less confrontational technique could work better (Male)

It's better sometimes to try and engage with the students rather than to be authoritative (Male)

They also began to challenge their understanding of learning and what constitutes effective teaching and learning. They questioned the assumptions that, for example, *'a quiet classroom equals a learning classroom'* (Male) or that *'once I had more control more learning would take place. [This is] not necessarily true. Students could be frightened'* (Female). Therefore for some of these participants the peer engagement did appear to help scaffold the participants to a higher level of criticality and ability to question their previous assumptions, as the following two quotes highlight;

My initial reflections stem from an egocentric assumption that the teacher is the centre of learning in the classroom ... I think the most important assumption to avoid in the future is that the classroom environment is teacher-centred and teacher-focused as I feel this is the root of the other assumptions I made in this reflection (Male)

I realised that I need to ask more questions of myself in reflections.....as we only recently came out of the second-level system, we never really questioned ourselves  
(Male)

### **Discussion of findings**

This study aimed to explore the impact of peer discussion on pre-service teacher's reflections on a critical incident and the extent to which such an approach would support pre-service teachers in reflecting more critically and in hunting their assumptions (Brookfield, 1995). The pre-service teachers participating in this study were enrolled in the second year of a 4-year B.Ed programme and therefore it was anticipated that their initial reflections on the vignette provided to them would draw on many lay theories since they had not experienced a significant practicum experience and they had only commenced the second year of their 4-year programme. In general this did appear to be the case, with a significant number (54%) framing the event as one caused by disruptive students rather than focusing in any way on the teacher. This external attribution of blame is not unique to this cohort. For example, in analysing pre-service teachers' portfolios of practice in the US, Thomas and Liu (2012) identified 'blameshifting' as one of the key sub-processes involved in displaying the self in a positive light – what they refer to as 'Sunshining'. The ego-centric nature of the classroom accounts provided also appeared to draw on very traditional discourses of authority and control with many of the students suggesting that the cause of the problem was lack of authority and discipline from the teacher and the need to be 'more authoritative'. Again, such perspectives are not necessarily new, Sugure (1997) for example, in exploring Irish pre-service teachers' perspectives of what makes good teaching drew heavily on both subject knowledge and the ability to manage and control students. The pre-service teachers are therefore drawing on what could be said to be traditional societal expectations of what makes a 'good

teacher' in the Irish context – that is, one that can control and discipline students. These ego-centric perspectives are also perhaps reflective of their stage of development as pre-service teachers and the stages of concern that frequently accompany this stage of their development (Moore-Ruso and Wilsey, 2014). In saying that, a sizeable minority (46%) did appear to take a less ego-centric perspective on the vignette and raised other possible reasons for the classroom incident that placed more emphasis on the teacher's actions and attributed less of the responsibility to the students.

While the initial interpretations of the vignette were largely in line with existing research, an interesting issue to emerge from the findings relates to the students' perceptions of their peers' accounts of the vignette. While the findings highlighted that there were different explanations provided to explain the classroom incident, the students believed that their accounts were largely similar. In exploring the possible reasons for these perceptions one of the student's comments that, 'they were almost bound to get the same perspective' suggests that they see an inevitable, almost common-sense way to teach that is shared by all. The homogeneous nature of the group in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity and schooling experiences, reflective of broader national trends (Keane and Heinz 2015), has perhaps contributed to this perception of 'sameness'. Peer and social conformity may have also contributed to the downplaying of difference in order to 'fit in' with others. In addition, given that none of these students have experience of teaching it could also be argued that, in the context where no one emerges as an 'expert', all perspectives are seen as equally valid. The non-hierarchical nature of the groups did appear to lend itself to sharing of perspectives and the taking on board of different issues but this did not always appear to change the students' initial views; instead according to them (as outlined in the reflection to task 2) the perspectives of others was added to their own perspectives. At a deeper ontological perspective, this positivist,

‘ontological realism’ perhaps intentionally plays down differences in order to give greater currency to the proposed ‘solution’ to the problem. This downplaying of difference somewhat mirrors the concerns expressed by Margison and Strobel (2007) where discussions can regress to the relativist view that all perspectives are equally valid.

Despite the pre-service teachers’ perceptions that their peers’ insights were similar to theirs and the differences in explanation initially offered, the third phase of the research showed that many that had initially attributed blame to the pupils (task 1) had now included additional explanations which presented a more nuanced, less ego-centric account of the incident (task 3). A significant percentage of pre-service teachers (89%) whose reflections had initially been categorised as ‘narrow’ began to show greater levels of criticality in the final task. These pre-service teachers began to question and unpack the assumptions evident within their initial reflection, resulting in them, for example, realising that *‘my initial reflections stem from an egocentric assumption that the teacher is the centre of learning in the classroom’*. Pre-service teachers’ reflections in task 3, appear to show that engaging in peer discussion can support pre-service teachers to challenge their preconceived ideas and assumptions regarding what constitutes ‘good’ teaching.

An initial read of these reflections could be interpreted as evidencing greater levels of depth however, when one considers the nature of the second reflections (Task 3) alternative explanations emerge. In attempting to make sense of this finding we found Lane et al.’s (2014) differentiation of two dimensions of reflections, namely breadth and depth, helpful. In this differentiation breadth refers to the content or ‘object’ of reflection whereas depth refers to the style or nature of reflection, i.e., from describing or reporting to critical aspects. Having examined the second reflections (Task 3), and paying particular attention to the students’ reflections that showed evidence of unearthing

assumptions, it could be argued that the second reflections have increased in breadth rather than depth. It appears that the students acquired alternative perspectives from the peer interaction that may challenge their preconceived assumptions, i.e. different 'objects' to reflect on, rather than deepening their initial insights. Lane et al. (2014, 484) note that the breadth of reflection is influenced by the level of teaching experience and also note that, 'a pre-service teacher observing a single lesson without any prior knowledge of the students or the school involved could not be expected to reflect broadly'. The nature of the pre-service teachers' reflections in this study supports this assertion as their ability to initially consider alternative interpretations of the vignette was somewhat limited. It appears that sharing perspectives with peers added to the breadth of potential issues to consider (objects) and did help them to identify some of their original assumptions. However, we would question the extent to which this process on its own provided deeper insights into their initial perspectives.

Another possible reason for the lack of 'depth' in the subsequent reflections relates to the vignette itself. Bain et al. (1999) for example found that the most important factor determining depth related to whether the reflection was related to one's own practice. In the case of this study, while the vignette was written to reflect the type of school and classroom they would expect to encounter, it was not their own experience and hence this could have also contributed to the lack of 'depth', i.e., without a personal commitment to understanding and learning from the experience there does not appear to be a high level of interest in pursuing and exploring particular issues in depth.

## **Conclusions**

Exploring the influence of the peer discussions on the pre-service teachers' reflections has raised questions in relation to their role, in particular the extent to which engagement

with peers, in the absence of more experienced teachers, can contribute to deeper understandings and insight on practice. As this study highlights, the exercise presented to the pre-service teachers in this study has provided an opportunity to share opinions and did support them to question their initial assumptions. However, it does not appear to have resulted in ‘deeper’ insights; perspectives on what may have contributed to the incident in the lesson were broadened, however deeper perspectives on their initial thoughts were not achieved. Nonetheless, the absence of ‘depth’ should not be seen as a limitation. For pre-service teachers, with little if any classroom experience, the sharing of perspectives and opinions is an important professional exercise and one that in time can lead to deeper insights, particularly if they are subsequently given the opportunity to explore in greater depth a particular issue that has emerged from their interactions with peers. Although small-scale, this study does suggest that, rather than seeing peer engagement opportunities on the practicum as assisting students achieve greater depth in reflective thinking, they should perhaps be seen as valuable scoping exercises to unearth alternative perspectives and to begin the process of ‘hunting assumptions’ (Brookfield, 1995), that can subsequently be reflected upon that may ultimately in the long-term lead to deeper thinking. In addition, from a social constructivist perspective, the current study also points to the need for pre-service teachers to engage with experienced teachers to facilitate critical engagement. It could be argued from this study that peer engagement, while beneficial, is not sufficient in its own right and needs to be followed or supported by engagement with experienced others, or a More Knowledgeable Other as previously discussed. This remains a challenge in the Irish context however where cooperating teachers are provided with limited time and professional development to engage in such activities with pre-service teachers.

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## Appendix 1

Brian was a second year student teacher teaching Materials Technology Wood (MTW) and Technical Graphics in a large urban post-primary school. He was teaching in the school for three weeks and had taught his current second year 2B MTW class three times per week during that period. His class were very energetic and seemed to be made up of student from a range of abilities and interests. They seemed to love lessons where practical work was conducted. Although they sometimes became quite disorganised he noticed that in general the students seemed to have an interest in practical work and in getting their projects completed. Unfortunately for Brian not all of his timetabled classes with the group took place in the MTW room because of the limited number of workshops in the school. Because of these limited resources he found that each week he was required to teach a double MTW class in a 'normal' classroom. These lessons seemed to becoming increasingly more challenging and difficult to manage. He had reprimanded a number of students for their behaviour and this seemed to have an effect on their engagement for a short period of time but recently he noticed that the general level of engagement of the class was getting worse. When he was explaining topics from the book they rarely seemed to listen and when they were asked to take notes from the board they seldom did so. When assignments were set he really struggled to get them to engage with the work. During his Thursday morning lesson with the group he was explaining the concept of deforestation with the group and asked them to take down the definition from the board. Instead of following his instructions a group of students at the back of the class, that appeared to be the most challenging group of the class, starting shouting and jeering him saying he was a 'tree hugger'. The lesson seemed to descend into complete disorganisation. Before trying to gain control of the lesson the bell rang and the students quickly left paying little attention to his requests for them to complete an exercise for homework.