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## Reflecting to Conform? Exploring Irish Student Teachers' Discourses in Reflective Practice

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### **Abstract**

A new model of reflective practice for student teachers on school placement was implemented into a teacher education programme. The model aimed to encourage critical reflection that challenged hegemonic assumptions and power relations. In contrast to this, the analysis of the student teachers' reflections revealed a desire to "fit in" and conform. Reflections portrayed student teachers' allegiance to conventional practices rather than a critique of them. Issues associated with power relations remained uncontested. The paper explores possible reasons for these low levels of critique and examines the normative effect of cultural practices on student teachers' reflections.

**Key words:** Reflective practice; critical reflection; student teacher; school placement; teacher narratives

## Reflecting to Conform? Exploring Irish Student Teachers' Discourses in Reflective Practice

### **Introduction**

The paper aims to explore the extent to which student teachers engaged in critical reflection as part of their reflective writing requirements on a ten-week teaching practice placement. Before outlining the research methodology employed in the study, the research context is firstly established by discussing reflective practice, critical reflection and by outlining the nature of school placement in initial teacher education programmes in Ireland.

### **Reflective practice**

The discourse surrounding reflective practice in teacher education identifies its benefits in assisting student teachers to make sense of their practice by broadening their perspectives (Bolton, 2005) and helping them address challenging problems they experience (Bartelheim & Evans, 1993; Loughran, 2002). Hammond-Stoughton (2007) believes that reflection plays a significant role in promoting self-awareness and in assisting individuals in gaining a greater understanding of themselves, their own reactions and perceptions.

Reflective practice is often touted as a mechanism to support student teachers in their early exposure to schools where current practices may not be in congruence with their own beliefs. It can assist them in coming to terms with “the balancing act to be performed in terms of developing their own style and independence, as well as adhering to re-established, often

tacitly agreed, internal rules of professional behaviour within the school” (Jones, 2005, p. 512). Using reflective journals can provide student teachers with “protected spaces for developing, critiquing and sharing reactions to experience and perceptions” (ibid, 2007, p. 1027).

Such is the level of faith in reflective practice it is now widely recognised as a central part of teacher education and the body of published research into the topic highlights its universal application within teacher education (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008). Liou (2001) argues that it is now the dominant paradigm in teacher education and similarly Panson, Rodrigues and Wilson (2003) suggest that it is a familiar landmark on most, if not all, initial teacher education programmes.

Despite the universal appeal of reflective practice, the differing understandings of its value and role have resulted in several interpretations (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Reflective practice can, on the one hand, be seen as quite functional aiming to address specific problems encountered by the teacher in order to improve practice. On the other end of the spectrum it involves a much deeper critical insight into practice, hunting assumptions and questioning conventional wisdom; this is reflected in the work of Grundy and Hatton (1995) when they argue that:

On the one hand, there is the view supported by Beyer & Zeichner and Giroux & McLaren, that teacher education ought to “promote a situation where future teachers can deal critically with what exists in order to improve it”. On the other hand, there is the view that teacher education for pre-service teachers should be integrative; it should ensure that they are well fitted to function non-disruptively in schools as they exist (p. 9)

Viewed along this technical/practical–critical/emancipatory spectrum the majority of the literature supports the critical aspects of reflection in supporting the interrogation of

beliefs and assumptions that underpin prevailing practices. A critical perspective is particularly important in teacher education as it is seen as a mechanism to assist in the deconstruction of the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) that often determines student teachers' practices. Mager (2002) for example notes that pre-service teacher education begins at childhood during the student teachers' exposure to the education system; this influence tends to have a filtering effect on their uptake of new perspectives on practice (Balli, 2011) resulting in the new wine changing when it is poured into the old bottle (Eisner, 1992). FAnson et al (2003) notes this resistance suggesting that student teachers often leave initial teacher education (ITE) "with little change to their preconceptions of teaching" (p.191), since these beliefs are so "deeply held and difficult to challenge" (p. 191).

Brookfield (1995) notes that reflection can only be considered critical in nature if it challenges existing assumptions and/or explores the dynamics of power relations. In a similar way Jay and Johnson (2002) see critical reflection involving an exploration of the broader socio-political and moral context of practice. For the purposes of this study critical reflection is conceptualised in a similar way since it is the view of the authors that "teacher education should, on ethical grounds, be directed towards social critique and transformation" (Grundy and Hatton, 1995, p. 9). The transformative nature of this practice however brings its own challenges as:

teacher educators concerned about the complex challenges and ethical choices facing young teachers, must find ways to help novice teachers not only teach successfully in the complex contexts of public schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, but also find ways to transform those contexts (Hammond-Stoughton, 2007, p. 1035).

Viewed and conceptualised in this way the process of engaging student teachers in reflective practice is a challenging undertaking. The early career of teachers is often seen as one of challenge and survival (Huberman, 1995) particularly amidst the perception that children are becoming “increasingly unruly and difficult to teach” (Hammond-Stoughton, 2007, p. 1025). Within this challenging context it is more than likely that any engagement in reflective practice would lean towards the immediacy of “survival” and would draw on existing beliefs - therefore it would be more technical/practical than critical in nature. Several studies into student teachers’ beliefs point to a rather conservative teacher-centred view of education with an emphasis on control and domination of learners, delivering curriculum content and transmitting information (Hammond Stoughton, 2007; I’Anson et al, 2003; Sugure, 1997). A preoccupation with control and transmission has a long history with effective teaching equated with the ability to successfully control pupils in the classroom (Golish & Olson, 2000; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey & Richmond, 1986).

In addition, when seen as part of an initial teacher education programme, where evidence of satisfactory completion of a reflective portfolio may form part of the assessment and accreditation process, other issues emerge. In this context, the influence of the intended audience on what is actually written by the student teacher must also be considered (Fersten & Fernsten, 2005; Hobbs, 2007; Poulou, 2007). In such situations there is a danger that the portfolio could be seen by the student teacher as a form of confession (Bolton, 2005) or as an opportunity to present a favourable image to the reader (Orland-Barak, 2005). Similarly it could also be seen as a log of conformity to display to potential assessors their compliance and integration within the existing school infrastructure and function.

There is also little empirical evidence that engagement in reflective practice actually improves teaching or pupil learning (Akbari, 2007; Cornford, 2002); particularly so in a culture of teacher assessment that values the classroom “performance” of the teacher over

other dimensions of their practice. Criticisms also point to research evidence that appears to suggest that student teachers' engagement in reflective practice is limited. Research into the use of reflective practice by student teachers in Taiwan found that reflections focused mainly on practical issues related to teaching and assessment and that overall levels of critical reflection did not show substantial development over the teaching experience (Liou, 2001). At a more local level, research by Harford and MacRuairc (2008) into practicing and student teachers engagement in reflective practice found evidence of a "transient form of reflection rather than evidence of critical reflection" (p. 509). They further concluded that, amongst student teachers, "a clear dichotomy emerges between the need to critically evaluate practice while at the same time presenting a positive perspective on an individual's pedagogical practice and professional development progress" (p. 509).

There are several possible reasons for this limited engagement in critical reflection amongst student teachers in particular. One of the most salient is the need to cope with the 'here and now' of the classroom and with the immediate demands of their new surroundings. It could be argued that in such settings practical concerns take precedence.

### **The research in context**

Initial teacher education in Ireland follows both a consecutive and a concurrent model, with a strong preference being advanced for the retention of both models of teacher formation (Coolahan, 2003). At post-primary level, the length of both the concurrent and consecutive models is a minimum of four years, with those taking the consecutive route firstly undertaking a three or four year degree in an academic specialism, followed by a one

year Higher/Graduate Diploma in education. Those choosing to follow the concurrent approach complete a four year degree course.

Irrespective of the model followed, teaching practice or school placement is “a long established component” and “a central element” of teacher education programmes in Ireland (Coolahan, 2003, p. 40). While the length of the placement may vary, it is considered an integral part of a student teacher’s development that aids them in understanding the dynamics of teaching and learning and the principles underpinning it (Coolahan, 2003). One’s experience on placement is viewed as “the most formative element of [one’s] initial development as a professional” (Drudy, 2004, p. 33).

While placement is viewed as integral to the development of a student teacher’s, there is currently no contractual obligation placed on schools to take student teachers (Williams et al., 2006, p. 74), an issue which was raised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as far back as 1991. While many cooperating teachers may provide guidance and assistance to students on a voluntary basis, “as a professional goodwill measure” (Coolahan, 2003), mentoring on the part of the cooperating teachers is yet to be formalised (Gleeson, 2004). In Ireland the co-operating teachers receive no education on mentoring nor do they play an official role in evaluating student teacher’s performance. While some cooperating teachers may be invited to comment on a student teacher’s performance during placement, their role remains “cooperative, informal but non-consultative in the grading of marks” (Williams et al. 2006, p.75). The final assessment of placement lies solely with external tutors who are attached to the teacher education institutions (see for example Harford & MacRuairc, 2008; Kellaghan, 2002; Williams et al., 2006).

Following the Kelleghan report (2002) this situation is due to be altered, with recommendations being advanced for schools and teachers to play a more formal role in



teaching practice (see Williams et al., 2006, p. 74). There appears, however, to be limited enthusiasm within schools for such alterations with reluctance being expressed towards schools becoming involved in the grading of student teachers (Mullins, 2004).

Mirroring international trends, reflective practice has become a prominent feature of teacher education in Ireland. Reflection on one's practice is perceived "as a productive way of helping student teachers become adaptable, inventive practitioners sketched in the OECD vision of future teachers" (Leonard & Gleeson, 1999, p. 56). Growing interest in the teacher as a reflective practitioner is evident in the increased emphasis placed on such teacher qualities in national policy publications such as the Green and White Papers on Education (1992; 1995), as well as the more recent work of the Teaching Council (2011)<sup>1</sup>, which place considerable importance on a teacher's ability to critically evaluate and reflect on their professional practice. Due to the priority placed on the teacher as reflective practitioner, one's ability to demonstrate reflective inquiry is formally assessed during the school placement (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008).

The current study, which took place in a university in the Mid-west region of the Republic of Ireland, involved student teachers who were nearing completion of a four-year degree in teacher education. The degree qualified them to teach at post-primary level in the areas of Physical Education with an elective, Technology, Science or Languages. The concurrent programme adopts an integrated approach, wherein subject specialist content, pedagogical content, educational content and teaching placement all form part of the degree programme. As part of the educational component of the programme, student teachers engage in a diverse range of modules including, for example, personal development, communication development, psychology of learning, planning for learning, reflective

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<sup>1</sup> A statutory body responsible for the professional accreditation of teachers

practice, curriculum studies and professional studies. Teaching practice placements are distributed throughout the four years, with student teachers completing a six-week placement in year two and a 10-week placement in year four. In general, entrants to the teacher education programme tend to be high achievers (Coolahan, 2003).

Reflective practice plays a central role in the student teachers' development on the programme. From early on in their studies, they are introduced to reflective practice. During their on-campus experience student teachers engage in several different experiences which they are required to reflect on. For example, during their first year of study student teachers participate in 'micro-teaching' following which they reflect on their experiences of teaching small groups of pupils. In second year student teachers explore reflective practice in detail and examine differing ways in which reflection takes place. During year three student teachers are provided with the opportunity to reflect on the social and cultural factors that influence schools. A strong emphasis is also placed on critiquing the values underpinning curriculum selection and how this affects pupils' and teachers' experiences of school. Student teachers engage in two teaching practice placements during their undergraduate programme – six weeks in 2<sup>nd</sup> year and 10 weeks in 4<sup>th</sup> year. During their two teaching practice placements student teachers are required to reflect on their teaching/experience and record their reflection in written form as part of a teaching portfolio. These reflections form part of the assessment of their school placement. Student teachers also complete related assignments while on these placements. In second year, the assignment places particular emphasis on hunting hegemonic assumptions as outlined by Brookfield (1995) while the fourth year assignment focuses on exploring and critiquing the school as a learning organisation. Throughout all opportunities for reflection student teachers are encouraged to critically reflect on their experiences rather than produce descriptive summaries of experiences and grading criteria reflect this focus.

## Method

The study aimed to examine the effectiveness of revised reflective writing guidelines as part of a final-year school placement on a four-year undergraduate teacher education programme. The revision of the reflective practice requirements was brought about due to increasing concerns that the reflective writing requirements did not facilitate the student teachers' engagement in critical levels of reflection. In the original model, the short reflections completed after each lesson tended to be quite descriptive and rarely critically examined aspects of practice. In general the reflections appeared to be largely descriptive recalling issues related to classroom management and pupil behaviour. They often had a common narrative (while an important expression of meaning in itself (Ho, 2005)) that normally underwent limited scrutiny by its authors.

In an attempt to address this issue the student teachers were provided with a series of guiding questions (please see table 1) which were to be used to support their reflections on their practice. In addition they were only required to write three reflective pieces per week (encompassing two weekday reflection, one end-of-week reflection, a mid-term reflection and a final reflection). The changes considerably reduced the number of reflections required and also altered their focus. These changes, it was hoped, would give greater time for the student teachers to reflect and it was envisaged that the new requirements would also assist them in critically reflecting on issues in their own practice.

The model was implemented in September 2010 for all fourth year student teachers on 10-week block placement, with professional development being provided for all teaching practice tutors. On completion of the 10-week placement, student teachers had just over 30 reflections that explored aspects of their practice throughout their placement. The two

authors visited a lecture attended by the student teachers, invited them to submit their reflections for analysis and provided them the means to do so (email address or drop off area). Six student teachers submitted their complete number of reflections for analysis. In total, 120 weekday reflections, 54 end-of-week reflections, six mid-term reflections and six final reflections were analysed. Ethical approval was sought from the authors' institutions prior to the research being conducted, with ethical procedures being followed at each stage of the study.

The six student teachers, who provided their reflections for analysis, are referred to as<sup>2</sup>:

- Aisling: Physical Education and Geography Teacher
- Audrey: Modern language teacher (French)
- David: Biology and Chemistry teacher
- Laura: Physical Education and Maths teacher
- Jonathan: Construction Studies and Design teacher
- Tony: Construction Studies and Design teacher

### **Approach to data analysis**

Guided by the work of Brookfield (1995), in reading and analysing the reflections, the authors were particularly interested in evidence of reflections that unearthed hegemonic assumptions that came to the attention of the student teachers and reflections that examined issues of power relations and power dynamics within the classroom, school and society in general. In analysing the collected data the authors were particularly interested in the discursive resources drawn upon by the student teachers in framing their experiences and

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<sup>2</sup> Synonyms have been provided for each pre-service teacher

reflections. The interpretative repertoire (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), one of three analytic concepts associated with Potter and Wetherell's (1987) discursive psychology was used in the analysis of the data. Interpretative repertoires, according to Reynolds and Wetherell (2003), consist of the routines of arguments, descriptions and evaluations evident in the way one talks. They are evident in the "clichés, anecdotes and tropes" one draws on in their talk and are "the building blocks through which people develop accounts and versions of significant events and through which they perform social life" (p. 496).

By focusing on the student teachers' use of commonly used lay theories (Sugure, 1997) and "interpretative repertoires" the study aimed to examine the extent to which prevailing discursive resources framed their reflections on practice. The researchers believed that the use of prevailing interpretative repertoires, and the framing of experience using these discursive resources, could indicate an absence of a critical perspective on their practice. The analysis of the data was cognisant of the fact that the reflections were also forms of teacher narrative which:

Express a worldview ... The ways in which stories about teaching are constructed, retold, and interpreted help to define how we structure reality. There are major ideological effects in the ways discursive practices represent and position situations and people as well as relationships between people (Hammond- Stoughton, 2007, p. 1027)

All data was analysed independently by the two authors. The authors, working separately, identified the interpretative repertoires used by student teachers to describe and analyse school and classroom experiences they were reflecting on. The analysis involved identifying the familiar clichés and recognisable routines of arguments that form the building blocks of teachers' description of classroom life, for example, '*don't smile till Christmas*', '*tell them who is boss*', '*maintain control*'. Having analysed the reflections, the two authors

met, discussed and identified emerging themes. The authors returned to and re-read the documents with these themes in mind. Following this second analysis, the themes were revised and again revisited. The reflections were read and re-read and “interrogated to uncover the unspoken and unstated assumptions implicit within [them]” (Cheek, 2004, p. 1145). Throughout this process the authors were as interested in omissions, that is, things that were not included in the reflections, as much as what was actually reported (Bryman, 2004).

## **Results**

The presentation of the findings mirror Brookfield's lenses of reflection that guided the analysis process, namely challenging hegemonic assumptions (critiquing and conforming) and power relations (control and power). The section begins with a discussion on a further theme to emerge from the analysis of the data: the common narratives used by student teachers throughout their placement (metamorphosis and narratives of change).

### **Metamorphosis and narratives of change**

It was envisaged that use of the model of reflective practice outlined above would promote critical reflection during student teacher's placement. While analysis of the data therefore sought evidence of reflections that examined issues of power relations and explored hegemonic assumptions, it emerged that these reflections tended to be descriptive narratives. These narratives revealed quite a lot about their challenges and conformity to school practices and portrayed little, if any, evidence of critical levels of reflection. Instead what appears to

have been captured was the “ritualistic socialization of new teachers” (Mager, 1992, p. 13) and conformity with the school system. The narrative shared a similar description amongst all six student teachers; starting with feelings of isolation and uncertainty which, over time, moved towards greater levels of confidence in their ability as a teacher and their position within the school, followed by feelings of belongingness. For example, in an early reflection Tony wrote, “I am feeling a bit overwhelmed...I am still trying to find my sense of rhythm”. Later in the practice he noted that, “I feel much more settled into the school”. Similarly Laura wrote early in the practice, “I still don’t feel like I have gotten into the swing of things yet” but later noted that, “I am happier now in my teaching role because I am finally settling in”. By the end of placement, the student teachers tended to feel “well established in the school and feel like a part of the school community” (Aisling).

Similar narratives existed amongst all other student teachers who were concerned about being recognised and accepted as a “real teacher” by other teaching staff and pupils. In one reflection, David, highlighted his concern of being accepted as a teacher;

There was a slight issue in that one of the teachers was not comfortable letting me alone with the class and this caused the students to see me as inferior straight away. They saw him looking over my shoulder which again undermined my authority. I will need to sit down and reassure the teacher that I am able to take over and set his mind at ease.

Audrey expressed a similar concern in relation to how she was seen by her pupils, “students see me as not a real teacher”. With time the student teachers experienced great feelings of delight when they overcame this obstacle. For example, Laura indicated that she didn’t feel like “the student teacher” anymore as pupils began to see her “as a real teacher”.

The “fitting in” process that dominated the early stages of the practice reflects the stages of concern teachers pass through where issues associated with their own “survival”

take precedence followed by concerns about the situations they are expected to teach in and finally to concerns about their pupils (Mager, 2002).

Throughout the 10 weeks the written reflections described the day-to-day experiences of the student teachers and particularly focused on challenging experiences (often where the student teacher had to deal with very disruptive behaviour or a critical incident in their teaching) or episodes in their practice that appeared to be personally rewarding and fulfilling. These incidents often recalled events where the student teacher felt that they had mastered the management and organisation of a class group or where they felt that they had successfully taught some aspect of the course to an individual or group of pupils. Throughout these reported 'highs and lows' the student teachers appeared to use the opportunity to reaffirm their career choice, which related to their sense of belongingness and conformity to the system.

This is definitely what I was meant to do.....I'm glad I have chosen this route for a profession...I now know I definitely took the right path in life (Laura)

Teaching is definitely the job for me (Jonathan)

I am happy I chose this profession (Tony)

Teaching gives me a buzz, I enjoy planning my lesson and I really do look forward to class. I look forward to school, and I thoroughly revelled in every opportunity to teach. This has been my biggest achievement because I now know that I definitely took the right path in life and chose the right career and that is some vindication for any individual, especially me (Laura)



But what is the purpose of this common narrative and who is it written for? Is the story of overcoming uncertainty and struggle used by them to assist them through the experience? Or is this meta-narrative used to frame their experience of the process? Is it presented for assessors as a form of confession (Bolton, 2005) or as evidence that they have undertaken and experienced this “rite of passage” to gain entry into the profession? The remarkable consistency of this common narrative and the use of similar interpretative repertoires to frame this “pilgrimage” process is perhaps portrayed for the purposes of the assessing tutor (to display the student teacher’s struggle and commitment to the profession) as much as a record of their personal journey. The opportunity to reflect could therefore be seen by the student teachers as an opportunity to express opinions and highlight their dedication to the profession that may not be possible to express verbally.

There is also evidence that the student teachers used the reflections as a form of confession. There were numerous examples of a confessional approach taken in their reflections. For example, in one extract from Tony’s reflection he highlights his mistakes and oversights:

I made a mistake in my lesson plan regarding the progression of activities. I had the cutting demonstration before the drilling and I only realised this on the morning. ... I should be able to consistently demonstrate skills in the class and ensure that students understand. The problem began with the planning which should have been better, I have no excuse for the mistake, I realise now that I must be more careful in planning out demos [demonstrations] so that the students understand.

Using a similar confessional tone, others used their reflections to display their awareness of the challenges of teaching and to show that despite their apparent successes, they had much to learn:

So a school's positive culture can make teaching and learning a lot more enjoyable due to the impact on students and teachers but one has to be careful not to assume that it is all going to be an easy road (Laura)

Teaching is not the cushy job that many outside of schools believe it to be. While the job will become easier/more manageable as I grow as a teacher through experience, it will be quite intense as I begin substitution work or my first full-time job as a teacher. This experience has been a massive improvement from my second-year teaching practice but I know I still have a long way to go (Jonathan)

Teaching is not always going to be a pleasant experience; this has taught me that I need to take these situations in my stride. I think I may sometimes take it to heart (David)

Analysis of the student teachers' reflections from this perspective raises the question of what is being written by them. Are they fictional works of art? In drawing on prevailing interpretative repertoires to "frame" their experiences is the exercise a log of conformity or a statement of allegiance to the teaching profession? If student teachers conceptualise the reflections in this manner is it possible to re-orientate their perspectives towards a more critical stance? The homogenising effect of the school on the student teacher's practice and attitudes is well documented (see for example: Bleach, 2001; Rippon & Martin 2003) and within this context should one expect a level of critical perspective while one is in the process of coming to terms with the demands of the transition from student to teacher. For example, Clement (2002) notes that, "colleges of teacher education do not graduate finished products. Rather, they graduate future professionals who need the continuing support of their colleagues, administrators, and school communities" (p. 13).

In this context, the need for professional recognition and support from other teachers in the school, particularly in a challenging setting where isolation and feelings of insecurity emerge within a profession where individualistic teacher cultures dominates (Hargreaves,

1994), will more than likely take precedence over any in-depth critique of practice. With this in mind are expectations of student teachers, in terms of the levels of reflection, too high? Indeed, as McIntyre (1993) asks, “is reflection on their [the student teachers] own practice the right place to start?” (p. 46). He further argues that given the large repertoires of experience that practising teachers can draw upon it is more meaningful to promote reflective practice amongst experienced teachers.

### **Critiquing or conforming**

Amidst this “coming of age” story the authors sought evidence of critical levels of reflection. In seeking evidence of assumption hunting and critical questioning of practice it emerged that, rather than questioning conventional practices in assessment, teaching and learning, classroom management and other aspects of school life, the reflections appeared to be used to display their allegiance to them. While school placements are often places where student teachers have to show compliance with regulations and school policies, and indeed they are encouraged to comply with these, there remains the opportunity to reflect on such practices and policies. There is evidence that the student teachers do indeed reflect on current practices and policies but there appears to be a lack of critique in this regard and an almost passive, if not at times enthusiastic, support of them. In line with other research that portrayed the conservative nature of new teachers and their focus on issues of control and information transfer (I’Anson et al., 2003; Sugrue, 1997), the reflections in the current study lacked critique of school practices.

The absence of a critical perspective on the school as a site of learning once again raises the issue of the need to “fit in”. Lacey (as cited in Roberts & Graham, 2008) categorised trainees’ social strategies in schools as promoting conformity (internalised adjustment), passive self-maintenance (strategic compliance), and influencing others to

change their interpretations of events (strategic redefinition). Within this study there was considerable evidence of the internalised adjustment of conformity. For example, Aisling, spoke of her need to fit in and adhere to the Catholic ethos of the school:

The Catholic ethos which the school upholds has a large impact on my role as a teacher in the school. It means I must respect the ethos of the school and in my role as a teacher, carry out any duties relevant to this ethos...by respecting this ethos it will allow me to settle into the school more quickly

Similarly Laura appeared to draw upon a conservative discourse to defend existing approaches to teaching and assessment in schools:

In an ideal world teachers would be able to facilitate students in their self-directed learning in every class but this isn't a realistic aim as we all know. It seems that the curriculum or even more so assessment in Irish schools just simply doesn't encourage self-directed learning

A similar view was also expressed by David who wrote that "we as student teachers have rose-tinted glasses and romantic ideas when it comes to education". It is evident from these extracts that the student teachers had acquired these interpretative repertoires and used them to position themselves as part of the teaching staff. Their positioning with respect to these views is perhaps highlighting their identity with the profession and was also reflected in their downplaying of their college experience over their school experience. For example, in one reflection, having described an event in her practice Aisling concluded, "this is just one of the many things you can't be taught in college". It would appear that the student teachers' identification with the teaching profession was partly defined by their rejection of much of

the theoretical perspectives on practice provided to them as part of their undergraduate programme which resonates with theories of social identity (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy & Flament, 1971). For example, Laura argued that "I think that in some ways what we experience in college is so limited... I think this only comes to teachers with practice and experience". Part of the induction into the school may therefore involve the "renouncing" of theoretical knowledge acquired on campus. The division of their experience in this way also highlights their use of existing interpretative repertoires that have tended to contrast the theory and practice of teacher education. An allegiance of this "folk psychology" (Petty, 2006) over more evidence-based approaches suggests that they either have limited belief in the theories presented to them as part of their teacher education or they lack the ability to apply such knowledge in classroom settings.

There was one case of a more critical perspective that, using Lacey's categorisation, could be described as passive self-maintenance (strategic compliance). In this example David is expressing his fear of "overstepping the mark":

I don't want to overstep the mark and make decisions that would affect the other teacher. I do not want to impose myself on the conversation....I don't want to be rude, I have to be careful not to irritate them in terms of being over confident, I feel that sometimes I am going against the grain, I have to be careful not to irritate them in terms of being over confident

Evidence of strategic compliance was very limited and, as highlighted earlier, most of the discourse could be described as conforming in nature. The conformist narrative, evident amongst the students, highlights the many interrelated influences at play. From a school level it highlights the conforming effect of the school culture on beginning teachers (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006; Roberts & Graham, 2008) and the influence of the cooperating teacher that, while not involved in the assessment of the student teacher, "may indeed be passing along a

random set of 'survival skills' to their student teachers" (Clement, 2002, p. 59). It also points to the "dominant conservative ideology in teacher education" (Grundy & Hatton, 1995) that significantly influences both the entry criteria for acceptance onto teacher education programmes and their experiences on them. It is difficult to see how, within this culture of conformity a "commitment to contestation and debate" (Grundy & Hatton 1995, p. 22) can exist. Harford and MacRuairc (2008) believe that:

a key challenge for all teacher educators is to find a legitimate place for reflective practice in the culture of performativity that is increasingly becoming a part of the culture of schools and the professional discourse of the education sector generally (MacRuairc & Harford, 2007). This issue, we would argue, is the most critical issue facing teacher educators in their efforts to promote and sustain a culture of reflection (Harford & MacRuairc, 2008, p. 1891)

### **Control and power**

Given that a significant element of critical reflection should explore issues associated with power relations (Brookfield, 1995), the authors sought evidence of student teachers' engagement in reflection of this nature. Again little evidence was found that the student teachers conceptualised reflection in this manner. The most significant and common issue to emerge from the analysis of the reflections was the sustained attention given to pupil control and domination. By far the most commonly reflected issue throughout all reflections was issues associated with pupil behaviour and classroom management. These findings concur with other studies that point to student teachers' preoccupation with classroom management (Balli, 2011; Clement, 2002). Throughout all reflections there were repeated use of words such as authority, control, prevent, stamp, disruption, discipline, classroom management,

strict and exert. Pupils were regularly referred to as “messers”, “troublemakers”, “misbehaving pupils” and “troublesome”.

In all but one of the reflections there was a desire for classroom silence and “control” of pupils. In the following extract Audrey attempts to question her focus on classroom noise levels:

How much “ground noise” should be allowed? Tricky question, because some girls for example could be very chatty, and at the same time get the task done and correctly in no time.... Multi task students! ... So I finally decided to accept noise as long at the work was done

Audrey’s attempt to question conventional wisdom and practice was the only example identified. In all other cases there was a complete absence of critical questioning in relation to the focus on classroom management and control. The following two examples have been selected as they highlight this low level of reflection and also show evidence of how the student teachers drew on several interpretative repertoires to describe what had happened.

I am very disappointed and discouraged after the last class today. .... The class was loud and hard to deal with. Pupils did not listen to instruction and it was a fight to maintain control in the classroom. .... As a teacher, especially with the junior cycle classes I must keep a very tight rein on them and be firm with them on simple things. Looking back, it was my first class with this group that has caused the problems throughout the rest of teaching practice. In that first class I was not strict enough, did not pick up on and deal with misbehaviour and ultimately let them away with behaviour that I should have called them up on. In future I will be very strict in the first couple of months with classes and will make sure everybody respects me as the teacher and will behave appropriately in the class. This will require a complete change of attitude on my part. I must stop being too nice and be very straight with

pupils. I must make sure they know the way they are expected to behave and know the consequences for breaking the rules (Jonathan)

In today's Technical Graphics lesson with my first-year group I noticed a lot of restlessness and unwanted chatting. This was not the normal behaviour I had come to expect from the class .... So could this have been the start of the misbehaviour snowball for the class? Now the behaviour was nothing major but it was enough to disrupt the class. I think the other aspect that is springing to mind as I write this reflection is the fact that I may have become a little complacent with this class group. I had reported in the last reflection that I was very happy with the group but am I forgetting that they are only first years? I think because I have been getting on well with them I was slow to issue reprimands and as a result they may have started to see me as a pushover. My solution was to set them working individually to quiet[en] them down. It worked in some way but I must change my approach for the next class. I think I will have to be careful in the next class not to let the behaviour get out of hand again (Tony)

The student's defensive position is most likely a result of the challenging environment of a classroom where pupil-teacher relationships have not developed yet and as a result of the relatively young age of the student teachers. They also highlight the very conservative nature of the group, particularly in relation to their understanding of the pupil-teacher relationship and how lessons should take place. A more extreme example of this emphasis on control is evident in the following extract:

I feel that the softly-softly approach is over-used with some pupils. They seem to be thriving on the idea that they are exempt from taking responsibility for themselves. We as teachers have been charged with the responsibility to instil respect for authority, seniority and society within these pupils but I fear that we are encouraging the contrary by allowing the pupils to waste away in their own apathy (David)



The ability to “control” a class seemed to define how the student teachers envisaged good teaching and subsequently this largely determined success and failure. Reflections often began highlighting disappointment and disillusionment before describing a disruptive classroom incident. Similarly, successful lessons and positive reflections were often as a result of “well managed” lessons or overcoming discipline related problems. The following two extracts highlight this emotional “tug of war” that appears to exist as a result of pupil behavior:

I have gained in confidence and come out of these classes smiling, helping me to enjoy my time in the school. Yet there are other times where I am having to fight for control of the classroom. One first year class is causing a particular problem with three or four pupils misbehaving and setting the tone for the rest of the class. These classes bring me right back to earth in terms of my enthusiasm and I have to turn around and plan a better lesson for their next class. This is very hard work and disappointing when I try to fix the problems and it doesn't work (Jonathan)

My overall feelings after the last two days are those of contentment but with a hint of disappointment. I feel very settled in the school as the pupils are, for the most part, extremely well behaved and classes are very productive. My fourth-year Geography class however is still causing trouble. They are extremely chatty in class and I find that they are very unwilling to participate productively.... In the next lesson I feel I must ensure to show the pupils that their behaviour in class will not be tolerated and hopefully reduce the level of disruption to the lesson (Aisling)

The common interpretative repertoires associated with classroom management such as, “don't smile till Christmas”, “laying down the law” and “stamping one's authority” were frequently drawn upon in defining their practice and shaping responses to problems associated with pupil behaviour. Their reasons for drawing on such defensive and

domineering repertoires could be their enacting of internalised models of the role of the teacher (Eisner, 1992) that are often deeply embedded from their experiences as learners:

In facilitating a dialog, teacher educators need to acknowledge student teachers' memories and, in doing so, teacher educators will uncover beliefs that need to be systematically examined and discussed. Without such a dialog, it is possible for student teachers to filter and sift information found in their teaching methods textbooks and to develop their future classroom management plan based more on their memories of past teachers' practices, both good and not so good, rather than on research-based strategies, concepts, and models disseminated in teacher education coursework. (Balli, 2011, p. 250)

The process of placement could be an attempt on the part of the student teachers, in line with the work of Roberts and Graham (2008), to gain a sense of control over their own role as a teacher and becoming more "teacherly" where they hold a belief system that a custodial approach implies a strict control on classroom settings and a lower level of flexibility towards others (Sava, 2002, p. 1017).

In addition to their views of classroom control and teacher authority an essentialist view of pupils emerged from the analysis of the data, with student teachers adopting an unquestioning belief that pupils have an innate fixed intelligence. A fixed intelligence can be used to explain differences in educational attainment and the success and failure of certain pupils within the education system (Lynch, 1987). Such an essentialist view was clearly evident within the reflections, with the use of such words and phrases as "weak", "better able", "less able", "strong", "intelligent", "faster and slower", "more academic" being common place. One reflection was particularly interesting in this regard, with the student

teacher continuing to assign particular pupils as “strong” and “weak” even after pupils had been placed within the “faster” class:

Three maths classes are on the same timetable strand and these would now be divided into a slower class and two faster classes. When this was being explained to the students they were told that the division of the classes had nothing to do with honours and pass but simply to do with the pace the class was going at. In reality however the students who were moved into the slower class will inevitably be more likely to do the ordinary level junior certificate paper.....  
I have the stronger of the students at maths in my class.... Now, for the most part the students have adapted to the pace of the lessons and the better students are more challenged. However I find that there are some weaker students in the class that do find difficulty in some areas (Laura)

Not only were pupils categorised as less able and weak but those who were labelled as such were represented within a negative light. For example, “some students just give the answers to the weaker students. This process does not entice the weaker students to figure out the solution by himself. Some students are hitch-hikers in the group” and “pupils were lower ability and high maintenance”.

Within all of the reflections, the student teachers conformed to the essentialist view held within Irish society and there was a clear absence of critique of the use of essentialist language. Lynch argues that an essentialist view, as portrayed above, removes responsibility from teachers and policy makers for the “failings” of certain cohorts of pupils. Responsibility instead is placed with the ‘weak’ pupil themselves. Within a context where children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to perform less well on assessment (Lynch, 1987), an essentialist view allows these failings to be put down to the innate intelligence of the child (or lack thereof) rather than to any deep rooted inequalities within the education system or society as a whole. Viewing pupils from an essentialist perspective allows the education system to remain unchallenged and removes any criticism

one can have with the system (Lynch, 1987). Through their unquestioning use of essentialist language, it could be argued that student teachers are conforming to the status quo and are ensuring that deep-rooted inequalities within the education system remain not only unchallenged but unquestioned.

### **Discussion**

The revised reflective practice requirements were introduced with the aim of encouraging student teachers to reflect at a critical level. The reality was far removed from this with student teachers appearing to adopt, what Grundy and Hatton (1995, p. 22) referred to as, “a taken for grantedness with respect to the status quo”. There was limited, if any, challenges to hegemonic assumptions or power relations; raising serious questions around the merits of the revised requirements. It appears that the prompts failed to promote critical reflection. Perhaps the revised requirements were too generic in nature and rather than scaffolding student teachers to reflect in a critical manner the new requirements merely encouraged generic uncritical narratives. The uncritical reflections evident in the current study may therefore be a result of uncritical generic questions. Rather than scaffolding the student teachers towards more critical levels of reflections, the prompts may have, on the contrary, encouraged greater levels of a conformist narrative.

While serious consideration must be given to rethinking the revised requirements, it is worth exploring additional factors that may be contributing to student teachers' ability (or lack thereof) to reflect at a critical level. For example, the lack of critical reflection may indicate challenges amongst student teachers to engage with their practice at such a critical level at this stage of their development. One could ask whether it is in fact “realistic to expect student teachers to examine practice from a broader socio-political perspective” (McGarr & Moody, 2010, p. 588) particularly when one considers the various personal,

school-based and system-wide factors that limits their ability to do so. While the authors are aware that they are drifting very close to engaging in essentialist interpretations themselves here – something they were so critical of in their own student teachers – they believe these issues still warrant attention. A number of these militating factors are explored below; followed by an exploration of the value of the reflections as they currently stand and some implications of this research.

When one considers the factors that may be preventing student teachers from reflecting at a critical level, the stage of development that the student teachers are at may be a contributing factor to their lack of ability to reflect at a critical level. Drawing on the work of Fuller (1969), the student teachers involved in the current study could still be largely concerned with ‘the self’ and hence adopt an ego-centric approach to reflection. Brookhart and Freeman (1992) suggest that during this stage of their development, student teachers tend to be concerned with issues around control and discipline, being liked by their pupils and their adequacy as a teacher. As a result gaining and maintaining discipline and control are of greater importance at the start of their teaching career (McCormack & O’Flaherty, 2010). Despite attempts to “introduce a more political dimension” to reflections, Down and Hogan (2000, p. 21) found that discussions with student teachers continuously revert back to discussing issues around refining skills, collecting useful resources and achieving positive learning outcomes. Their limited exposure to the school and classroom environment as well as the emphasis placed (in line with their current stage of development) on acquiring “a concrete toolbox of ideas and activities” could be inhibiting their ability to question their practice and those of the school.

Eisner (1992) referred to schools as “robust institutions” whose very robustness provides a form of social stability. Such a culture of schooling could be a deterrent against critical reflection and may limit student teachers’ ability to question “the way we do things

around here". It has been found that cultural aspects of school life can "condition probationer teachers expectations from an early stage" (Rippon & Martin, 2003, p.219), can "exert a powerful enculturation influence on the beginning teacher" (Killeavy, 2001, p. 119) and tends to "promote conformity to an occupational norm" (Roberts & Graham 2008, p. 1409). Like the student teachers in the current study, trainee teachers often express a strong desire to fit in, to gain approval and "to feel part of the team from day one" (Rippon & Martin, 2003, p. 216); this is true of the Irish post-primary context, where "to be" is to be "like the rest" (Hogan, 1983 as cited in Gleeson, 2010, p. 16). As Langhout and Mitchell (2008) argue, teachers, like pupils, are socialised into the norms and values of the school and those who do not "fit in" to the existing culture can pay for their lack of conformity. Socialisation into the school norms can limit the ability of student teachers to challenge the hegemonic assumptions of the institution they are attempting to fit in to. What is more, the beliefs of the host institution are swiftly taken on board by the student teacher and "quickly supplant any values and practise deriving from the training institution with which they conflict" (Killeavy, 2001, p. 119). The "wash-out effect" (Zeichnew & Tabachnick, 1981) results in student teachers relying more on teachers within the school and valuing their experience above any other forms of knowledge they have received throughout their development. The critical questions and issues raised within their teacher education programmes are soon forgotten and are replaced by the values of the host institution.

The dominance of the technical paradigm within Irish post-primary schooling ensures that questions around power and control remain unasked. Within such a context, control of both the learner and the learning environment (including the teacher) are prioritised (Gleeson, 2010) and critical debate and discussion are frowned upon. Being products of such a system, it could be argued that the entrants to teacher education programmes have become accustomed to existing, performing and succeeding within such an environment. They,

therefore, lack a “critical intellectual tradition” (Lynch, 1985, p. 16) and have limited experience of challenging their own and others’ ideologies. In addition, entrants to teacher education programme have been found to be “more traditional and less progressive” (Skipper & Quantz, 1987) and also tend to be high achieving pupils who are the successes of the education system (Coolahan, 2003, p. 21). These factors may go some way to explaining the reluctance to ask critical reflections about their experience on placement and about an education system within which they have succeeded.

The limited levels of critical reflection from the student teachers in the current study raises questions about the relevance of the exercise, with critical reflection being found to be “far from the main concern of the beginning teacher” (Dinkelman, 2000, p. 217). The ability to reflect in a more critical and complex manner can take an extended period of time for the majority of teachers (Hatton and Smith, 1995) and may be beyond the realm of pre-service education alone (Dinkelman, 2000); begging the question: do the reflections in their current form have a value in the student teachers’ development if they are not critical in nature? Their main value would appear to lie in the opportunity they provide to “get things off their chest” and express emotional responses to situations that they have experienced in their practice. It is also, as highlighted earlier, being used as an opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to their chosen careers. Ward and McCotter (2004, p. 255) state, “it is not supportive to ask student teachers to ignore their self-focused concerns” and the almost therapeutic value of this form of writing should not be underestimated. The challenge, however, is to ensure that the depth of these reflections eventually move beyond the mere therapeutic and self-focused to the critical as they develop as teachers. The current level of reflections should be seen as the start of the reflective journey for these student teachers where they begin in the technical and progress, with time and support, into the more practical and eventually critical realm. It could be argued that this would be extremely difficult in a

system that does not have a formal period of mentoring and induction for new teachers. Induction has been identified as a vital phase in a teacher's development (Luft, 2007) and has, when offered in a structured and supportive manner, resulted in greater levels of reflection (Smethem & Adey, 2005). Having greater coherency between the three I's of teacher development (initial, induction and in-service) would permit the adoption of a developmental approach to reflections (Bolam et al., 1995), where initial focus can be placed on survival and technical skills but would eventually, during the latter stages of initial and induction education, progress to a greater focus on more socio-political issues.

Obviously though, initial teacher education remains a vital cog in the process and must continue to ensure that it supports and encourages pre-service student teachers to move towards (or as close to) critical reflection before they reach the induction phase. Considering the revised reflective practice requirements implemented as part of this study, two additional factors could be considered. Firstly, is the issue of time (or lack thereof) prior to writing reflections. Drawing on the five level model developed by Griffiths and Tann (1991), one could argue that the student teachers in the current study are not supported in moving beyond the first level involving rapid reaction and an immediate response. Reflections, it has been found, require "detachment from an activity followed by a distinct period of contemplation" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p.34). The revised model, while initially considered as allowing more time for student teachers to reflect, still demands a set number of reflections each week to be written at set times during the week. Such a model may not adequately support and enable the student teachers to spend adequate time contemplating an issue before writing their reflections. There is a need to allow, again drawing on the work of Griffiths and Tann (1991), additional time and support for "pause for thought" and "time out to reassess" which may take weeks, months or even years. The challenge is to provide a reflective practice framework that enables student teachers to do so. One possible way of introducing greater



time to reflections could be to introduce “dialogue with others” (Day, 1993, p. 86) – an aspect which is missing from the current requirements. Harrison (2002, p. 257) argues that talking with others “is a valuable professional activity” and through working together as critical friends student teachers could describe, explain, question, explore and challenge their hegemonic assumptions, all of which would lead to more critical reflections (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

In addition to time, other aspects of the model may have contributed to the low levels of critical reflection observed. As has been outlined earlier, who the intended audience for the reflection is, and whether it is assessed, greatly influences what is written in student teachers’ reflections. The narratives may have remained similar to past student teachers’ reflections because they continue to be assessed as part of the school placement. In this context it could be argued that regardless of the prompts provided, student teachers may produce similar narratives since the aim of the exercise, as seen by the student teacher, is to impress the assessor and display compliance with perceived expectations. It is perhaps not surprising in this context that a narrative that emphasises their commitment and dedication to the profession prevails. The subtle but complex power relations which exist between the student teacher and tutor may stifle a truly critical perspective where, in the minds of the student teacher, certain topics continue to remain “out of bounds”.

From the issues discussed it is evident that there are perhaps many reasons for the absence of critical reflection and that espousing an essentialist view of student teachers, as not having the capacity to engage in this level of reflection, ignores the powerful school culture which they must engage in, the power relations that exist between the student teacher and assessor and the effectiveness of the prompts used to encourage reflection.

And what about us? What role does the host institution play in promoting or inhibiting critical levels of reflection? If, as stated by Boud and Walker (1998, p. 201) “we

are to follow our own preaching's", the critical lens we espouse so dearly needs to be turned inwards and questions need to be asked regarding how critical the host institution is despite its many preachings. We, like our student teachers, are products and successors of the education system – how well positioned are we to raise critical questions of a system that has served us so well? Perhaps, despite our best intentions, we continue to portray “a dominant conservative ideology in teacher education” (Grundy & Hatton, 1995, p. 7) and rather than developing “the prophets” of our system (Trant, 1998) our practices ensure that our teachers “are well fitted to function non disruptively in schools as they exist” (Grundy & Hatton, 1995, p. 9). Perhaps we are content once our student teachers adopt our critical interpretation of the education system rather than developing and exploring their own; resulting in a situation where student teachers tell us what we want to hear rather than actually truly questioning their own experiences of schools. It could be that student teachers do in fact critically question their practices and experiences in schools but within the safe confines of their peers out of the reach of their assessors. One cannot remove the assessor from the process; posing key questions for teacher educators. If, one’s ability to critically engage in reflective practice is seen as a key learning outcome of initial teacher education, how can we assess these learning outcomes? Can the instruments used capture the extent to which the students have engaged in critical thought? Will the level of reflection be stifled if the final product is assessed?

On a concluding note, it is important to identify the limitations of the current research and to explore some possible additional studies that may further increase our understanding of student teachers engagement with critical reflection. One of the main limitations of the current study revolves around the fact that it relied on one data source. The authors only drew on the written pieces to explore the level of reflection engaged in by student teachers. Perhaps, had interviews with the student teachers been conducted, a greater understanding of

their level of reflection could have been identified. Perhaps the student teachers may have been more reflective in a verbal one-to-one context than they had been in writing. Perhaps, when the stress of assessment is removed and when student teachers are no longer reflecting for an external audience, their approach and depth of reflection may have improved. The next stage of the research will involve conducting interviews with student teachers in order to gain an understanding of their perspective on the reflections, what they view the purpose of the reflections as, who they are writing for and how comfortable they feel being fully open and honest within the written pieces. The study could then move on to explore the student teachers' perspective on the various personal, school-based and system-wide factors that impact on their level of reflection. Further research should also explore reflective practice as a group process and make greater use of student teachers interaction amongst their peers to examine how dialogue with others can result in the social construction of new knowledge and deeper levels of reflection. As it is currently constructed within the model outlined in this paper it is primarily seen as an individual process.

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### Appendix

Reflection type	Questions
<b>Week day reflections</b>	1. What are your overall feelings now at the end of the last two days (one day) of teaching?
	2. Looking back, what do you want to think about more deeply?
	3. Describe this issue briefly.
	4. Why is this so important for you as a student teacher?
	5. What questions does this raise?
	6. From reflecting on this issue and from reviewing your previous reflections, what insights have you gained? Links to knowledge base, if possible. These links are a requirement for Year 4 student teachers.
<b>End of week reflections (select an issue/topic to focus on)</b>	1. What have you learnt about the topic (students choose a topic to reflect on that was important to them this week, i.e., building relationships & establishing a positive learning Environment or Motivating a diverse group of pupils etc) from your experience and previous reflections during the week?
	2. What have you learnt about the topic from lectures and from your reading that will help you in your teaching and in your role as a teacher in the school?
	3. How will this impact on your teaching and on your role as a teacher in the school? (be specific)
	4. Outline three bullet points to summarise your learning.
<b>Midterm reflection</b>	1. At this stage in the placement, which issue(s) would you consider the most important to you – and why?

	2. For each issue, show how your learning has developed since the start of the placement. <i>Don't just copy these from earlier reflections.</i>
	3. To what extent has your use of innovative teaching contributed to student learning?
	4. What are your priorities for the next part of the placement in relation to your development as a teacher - and why?
<b>Final reflection</b>	1. Looking back over your teaching practice placement, what have you learnt about yourself as a person?
	2. What was your biggest challenge and why? What have you learnt from this about yourself as a teacher and about teaching and learning?
	3. At the end of teaching practice, what are you most proud of and why? What have you learnt from this about yourself as a teacher and about teaching and learning?
	4. In what areas do you need to develop as a teacher?
	5. Based on your teaching practice experience, what broader social and political issues mean the most to you and why?