

Embarking on the Teaching Journey: Pre-service Teachers Reflecting upon Themselves as Future Teachers

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Abstract

This article reports on a research study that examined 25 reflective papers written by pre-service teachers a few weeks into attending primary teacher education. The overall aim of the study was to gain insight into the students' thoughts and ways of reflecting as a basis for taking action to improve lecturing, tasks and exercises which promote reflection in the primary teacher education program. The students were asked to write a paper reflecting upon "The teacher I want to become". Two research questions were posed upon the material: What images of teachers emerge in the texts? How is reflection carried out in constructing these images? The analysis of the reflective papers revealed that the students' images of themselves might be placed in the main category; "caring teacher". Furthermore their ways and levels of reflection varied considerably from descriptions and fragmented thoughts to accounts with elements of dialogic reflection.

Keywords: Reflective writing, Pre-service teachers, Teacher education

1. Introduction

Student teachers' knowledge about teaching has been developed long before they enter the teacher education programme. They have behind them a long "apprenticeship of observation" after spending years in classrooms observing teachers' activities (Lortie, 1975). They therefore bring with them ideas and images about what teaching and learning is all about, and what characterizes effective and less effective teachers. These ideas however have been acquired through experience as students, not as teachers. Consequently, notions are likely to be common sense, personal, non-analytical and make up a limited perspective on teaching and teachers' work. Nevertheless, these preconceptions constitute a very powerful part of teacher socialization and strongly influence teacher students' and teachers' ways of thinking and behaving (Berliner & Calfee, 1996; Dillon & Maguire, 2001; Goodson, 2000; Zeichner, Tabachnik & Densmore, 1987). Ross (1987) argues that pre-service teachers select attributes and practices of their own former teachers and synthesize them into an idealized image or model of the teacher they want to become. As far as negative experiences are concerned, it is argued that student teachers tend to wish to provide their pupils with what was missing in their own schooling experience (ibid).

The influence of pre-training experiences and the assumptions student teachers bring with them into teacher education require exploration. It is obvious that they can't be considered as empty vessels to be filled up with new theories and principles of teaching when entering teacher education programmes. This is a major challenge for teacher education that often seems to fall short when it comes to helping students develop and elaborate their experiences and preconceptions (Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Lager-Nyquist, 2003).

Teacher education programmes operate on the basis of the notion that reflection is a critically important characteristic of a professional teacher and that promoting reflection is vital to pre-service teachers' professional learning. The terms "reflection" and "reflective practitioner" are now common currency in teacher education and teachers' further professional development. There is an extensive use of these terms and of different models and exercises meant to promote reflection in teacher education programmes in Europe and the US. These goals and ideals about reflection and reflective approaches to teaching become apparent in a plethora of exercises, essays, papers, etc given to the students. There is, however, often a taken-for-granted, unproblematic usage of the term "reflection" and, ironically, it has come to be used in many cases both uncritically and unreflectively (Griffiths, 2000, p. 539).

1.1 Reflection

Dewey's (1933) conceptions of experience and reflection have provided a foundation for how reflection is understood in education. His work points us in the direction of building upon the experience of the learner. According to Dewey, (ibid) there are two abstract principles which explain the nature of experience: Continuity refers to the notion that humans are always affected by experience. Each experience is stored and carried on into the future. Dewey argues that we learn something from every experience, whether positive or negative, and one's accumulated learned experiences influence the nature of one's future experiences. Interaction builds upon the notion of continuity and explains how past experience interacts with the present situation, to create one's present experience. Learning from experience thus implies to make connections between previous happenings or incidents and future consequences. Dewey described reflection as: [...] "an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds supporting it and further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933, p. 6). Reflective thinking begins with a state of doubt, hesitation, or perplexity and moves through the act of searching to find material that will resolve, clarify, or otherwise address the doubt. This material may consist of past experience or/and a fund of relevant knowledge – neither of which necessarily leads to reflective thinking.

Building on Dewey, Rodgers (2002, p. 848) points out that the function of reflection is to make meaning: to formulate the relationships and continuities among the *elements* of an experience, between *that* experience and other experiences, between *that* experience and the knowledge that one carries, and between *that* knowledge and the knowledge produced by thinkers other than oneself. Dewey stresses that an experience is not the same as thought. Rather, it is the meaning that one perceives in and then constructs from an experience that gives that experience value. Consequently, having had and seen different teachers during one's school-time is not true experience, and recalling memories from school is not reflection.

In acquiring a reflective habit attitudes play an important role. The most important attitudes are, according to Dewey (1933, p. 30), open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility. He also made a connection between thought and experience, believing that thinking is natural but that reflective habits of mind need to be taught.

1.2 Reflective Writing

Reflective writing is generally used as a means to promote reflective thinking (Ross, 1990; King & Kitchener, 1994). Hatton and Smith (1995) present a framework for understanding reflective writing, identifying four levels of reflectivity found in pre-service teachers' journal writing. The first level, *descriptive writing*, is not reflective at all, but merely describes events or situations and interprets them in the light of personal worries and previous experiences. The second level, *descriptive reflection*, provides some attempt to analyse reasons for events or actions, but in a reportive or descriptive way, occasionally based on personal judgment, but can also include interpretation of readings. The third type, *dialogic reflection* is more complex as the writer steps back from events and engages in a dialogue with him/herself, which includes an exploration of possible reasons using qualities of judgement and possible alternatives for explaining and hypothesising. Such reflection is analytical or/and integrative of factors and perspectives and may recognize inconsistencies in attempting to provide rationales and critique (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 49). Only via the dialogic mode can reflection, according to Hatton and Smith (ibid), move into the fourth level, *critical reflection*. Here ethical criteria, based on social, political, and cultural considerations, are used to question the status quo. This kind of reflection involves giving reasons for decisions but also includes the broader historical, social and political contexts for the reasoning.

Teacher students bring with them preconceptions consisting of personal and unarticulated common sense beliefs about teaching, learning, and the self as teacher. It is a fundamental idea in teacher education that reflection will defy such preconceptions. One strategy to address this is to debrief their school experiences through the use of reflective writing in order to promote deeper thinking and gauge understanding. This requires exploration of the assumptions student teachers bring with them to teacher education (Martin, 2005; Stuart & Thurlow, 2000). In developing teacher education and bringing about professional learning for the students it is, thus, vital to examine both the content of the students' reflections and how they actually reflect in different contexts.

2. The Current Study

Studies of reflection in pre-service teachers' writing have been mainly of two types: those that focus on the content of reflective thinking and those that focus on the reflective processes (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). In the study reported in this article both sides of reflective writing are included. The study arose from teacher educators' commitment to the importance of reflective practice, and the main aim of the study was to gain insight into the students' thoughts and ways of reflecting as a basis for taking action to improve lecturing, tasks and exercises in the primary teacher education

program. The article draws upon data from the first part of this project, exploring the beliefs and images of teachers and teaching that the students bring with them when they start their teacher education. The study also examines the ways in which the students reflect upon these beliefs and images. By making these dimensions of student thinking explicit, teacher educators are given better grounds for developing and sustaining reflective practice and thinking, both for the students and for themselves. The object of the study was reflective papers written by the prospective teachers a few weeks after entering primary teacher education. The students were told to: "Reflect upon the teacher you want to become". The reflective papers serve as windows into our students' thinking and beliefs, and the scrutiny of the papers was guided by two main research questions, focusing on both the content in the students' perceptions and their process of reflecting.

- What images of teachers emerge in the texts?
- How is reflection carried out in the construction of these images?

The first question aims to describe the content of the images the student teachers have of themselves as future teachers and, thus, what aspects of teaching they consider essential. The second question illuminates the students' reflection about their future teaching and their ways and levels of reflection. Findings from this study provide a relevant base for a wider discussion on the nature of the challenges facing teacher education in improving levels of reflection in pre-service teachers.

2.1 Data Sources and Analysis

Teacher education for primary school teachers in Norway constitutes a four year program consisting of different subject matters, pedagogy and periods of school placement. Fostering reflection and educating reflective practitioners are key objectives for the teacher education. Most of the students attend this course of education directly after graduation from upper secondary school. Thus they are about 19 years old, and most of the young people who choose to be primary school teachers are girls. Among the assignments the students complete in their first semester at our university college is that of writing a reflective paper on "the teacher I want to become". The length of the paper is expected to be two pages with line space one and a half and font size twelve. These papers are submitted to the teacher educators via the electronic learning platform Class Fronter.

In this study 25 of these reflective papers out of the cohort of about 100 students were randomly selected and anonymised. All of the 25 students were ethnic Norwegians and three of them were male. Data of this kind are not originally meant for a research purpose. They are naturally occurring extant texts (Charmaz, 2006, p. 35), and can be seen as social facts that "construct particular kinds of representations with their own conventions" (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997 p. 47). Some of the advantages of this kind of data are their richness, relevance and availability (Silverman, 2001, p. 122). In studying data like this, however one needs to be aware of what kind of texts they are, what they represent, and what and whom they are meant for. In this study the students had written a text given by and addressed to teacher educators.

The analysis of the reflection papers was carried out through an inductive approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994) where open and focused coding was combined (Birks & Mills, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At first each paper was read in detail in order to get a general sense of the text without using predetermined categories in order to see what themes would emerge. The data were allowed to speak for themselves (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996). The researcher tried to stay close to the participants' own words, phrases and sentences. Coding qualitative data material line by line is one way to remain open to the data, and to identify the participants' implicit as well as explicit concerns and statements (Charmaz, 2006). Each paper was considered a textual whole and initially read and coded as an independent text. In the next stage of the coding process, cross-case comparisons were made. In this way, the data were subjected to a systematic coding process and were reduced by an inductive process that concentrated upon the emerging themes that were grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

A research associate not directly involved in the study, but with extensive experience in this qualitative mode of inquiry, participated in the inductive analyses (Peter & Lauf, 2002). Investigator triangulation increased the trustworthiness of the study's results.

In a later stage of the analysis, for the second research question about how the students reflected, Hatton and Smith's (1995) categories of reflective writing were used as an analytical framework. Their four levels of reflective writing was an appropriate tool to analyse the students' ways of reflecting because, according to Orland-Barak (2005), they are "practical, ethical, critical and transformational" (p. 33).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Caring and Being a Role Model

The analysis of the 25 reflection papers uncovered themes and patterns that emerged from the data. The importance of being competent in terms of knowing subject matter well is made clear in nine of the twenty-five student texts. A similar number of students points out the importance of pedagogical skills even though the exact articulation varies. Examples of formulation include such phrases as “pedagogically well-versed”, “one has to vary and use a diversity of teaching approaches”, “one has to use pedagogical tricks”, and “one has to be good at conveying knowledge”.

I want to make the classes exciting and varied, to make the pupils want to learn, and make them positively inclined towards school. As a teacher I want to be creative and lead classes using other than standard teaching practices. [...] A teacher is also supposed to control and lead the class which can, at times, be difficult since each class is composed of many different people with different needs and motives. It is therefore important to get to know the pupils. I think that has to be a prerequisite to be a good teacher, a teacher whom the pupils respect.

A few students point to the fact that pupils have different needs and resources, and that teaching needs to be adaptive. Furthermore, the challenge of classroom management is pointed out by some of the students. However, although the students emphasize the importance of professional and pedagogical skills for teaching, the main theme to be found in their texts is that they want to be *caring teachers*. Both the number of students calling attention to the caring dimension and the extensive volume they have given to this theme, demonstrate how important they consider it. Nineteen of the prospective teachers underline that one of the main responsibilities for a teacher is to take care of, and have consideration for, all aspects of the pupils’ development, learning and well-being. The two adjectives used most frequently in the texts are: *caring* and *committed*. Furthermore the importance of being *glad*, *just*, *kind*, *attentive*, *forthcoming* and *patient* when interacting with children is underlined.

I want to embrace my pupils the very first day and keep embracing them [...] want to hold them close and hard but not so hard as to hurt them. I want to observe their thoughts and opinions, listen to everything they have to say and give them free rein to explore strange, new worlds. [...] I want to give my pupils a lot of positive experiences. [...] I want to be their kind and knowing friend.

A caring teacher is strongly concerned about the children, and one can see repeated instances of formulations focussing on being children-centred and having a huge sense of responsibility for them as persons. The importance of behaving as an example for the pupils is also pointed out:

I hope to be an educator and a positive role model for the pupils.

I hope to become a good role model for my pupils. I remember my own time in primary school, and how much I respected and admired my teachers. Some of those teachers have imprinted themselves in my heart, and I hope to be the same kind of teacher for my future pupils as well.

I want to become a teacher whom my pupils will respect and appreciate.

Also these wishes link with the image of the solid, caring adult. “I will be knowledgeable and pedagogically accomplished. I will care for my students and be one with them and at the same time a good example for them in my role as a teacher”. This statement, made by one of the students, sums up the general conception of what kind of teacher the majority of the students want to be in the future. Other studies of prospective teachers report concurrent results. Personal characteristics seem to be important and the caring dimension is highly valued (Sanders & Carignan, 2003). Younger, Brindley, Pedder and Hagger (2004) have made an extended study of developing professionalism in teacher trainees and found that the trainees wanted to be enthusiastic and encouraging and possess interpersonal skills. Prospective teachers’ accounts are striking in their emotional commitment to pupils and teaching and the strongly idealistic versions of being a caring teacher and a role model. Their descriptions are permeated by “passion” (Younger et al., 2004, p. 249).

3.2 School Experience and Levels of Reflection

Thirteen of the 25 students explicitly mention their own experiences from school. The remaining students make more of a litany of how they will be as teachers. They make less effort to show or justify their descriptions by describing their own school experiences.

Applying Hatton and Smith’s (1995) levels of reflective writing in analyzing the reflective papers, the majority of the texts reveal the lowest level, that is, no reflection at all. Those texts are purely descriptive with no reasoning or elucidating of their thoughts (Dewey 1933). The following examples illustrate this non-reflective, descriptive writing:

When you say you're studying to become a teacher, many state their envy and comment on all your holidays and spare time. [...] That was not the reason I chose to study to be a teacher. [...] But at the same time, having most holidays and weekends off, isn't necessarily a bad thing. I couldn't have managed a shift job where one works day and night, afternoon and evenings. [...] In my home, mum was ready with dinner when we got home from school, and I want my children to experience that too.

I hope to be an amusing teacher, one who is happy all the time. The worst thing I know is angry and grumpy teachers, who treat their pupils differently. When a teacher is angry and yells at his or her students, the pupils themselves become incensed and the whole class suffers. When teachers treat their pupils differently, all suffer for it; those who are favoured by the teacher and those who aren't.

A few students have gone one step further and try to discuss and analyze their own school experiences in relation to their future profession, illustrated by these quotes:

Over the years, I've met a lot of different teachers. [...] It is important to bring along the positive things from the good teachers, and remember to avoid doing the things the poor teachers did. Naturally enough, my thoughts drift back to my favourite teachers, and try to understand why they were well liked. What they all had in common was the fact that they invested a lot of time and effort into getting to know their pupils and adapt the teaching to the individual pupil.

I have had a number of teachers over the years and they have all influenced me and my view on teachers and the role they have in a classroom. [...] I want to combine the best aspects from the teachers I had during my education. I then want to create my own version of the best teacher out of these.

These students try to look back on their own school experiences and single out the best sides of their teachers and modify these into the teacher they want to become.

They establish links between events and consequences, and turn their own memories from their school days into experiences, from Dewey's (1933) clarification of the connection between experience and reflection. According to Hatton and Smith's levels this student is making a descriptive reflection where some effort is made to analyze reasons for his/her thinking about future teaching.

A further step forward in terms of reflection is taken by the student who wrote the following:

I could of course just copy the good teachers I've had over the years. But that could at the same time be a bit difficult, mainly because times change. What my teachers did 10 years ago isn't necessarily the best for the pupils today. Over the years technology and other tools have changed. And ways of teaching have not exactly stayed the same since then either. [...] Another point against me becoming a teacher, solely based on what I remember as positive from my days as a pupil, is that teachers and pupils have a different way of looking at things. What I experienced as fun back in those days wasn't necessarily what I learned the most from.

Beyond analyzing what their favourite teachers did, the student also questions whether this can be directly transferred. This is seen in relation to changes in school and in society. Being a teacher today, is being a teacher in a context where children's upbringing conditions present different challenges from what teachers have been faced with in the past. The student also poses a meta-question whether the lessons that were most fun brought forth most learning.

My first impression on this task was that I cannot fully know what kind of teacher I will be at this stage, because I know that through the course of the education I will acquire and absorb knowledge and experience which will lead to expanded awareness and probably changes in my attitudes and thoughts on teachers and the profession of teaching. The teacher I am going to become will be created through the knowledge and experience I acquire along the way in addition to my own values and the experiences life has given me, and the choices I will take at any point in life.

This student shows an understanding, that one cannot draw simple conclusions and one's own activities as a teacher are influenced and situated in a social, cultural and historical development and context, as well as based on one's own values and choices. This student points to the nature of experience as Dewey describes it. Both the notion of continuity and of interaction are represented in the educational process as the student analyses it. These latter examples can be seen as a dialogic reflection (Hatton & Smith, 1995) where the students step back and engage in a dialogue with themselves where different considerations and reasons are brought to light.

3.3 Images and Reflection: Implicit and Limited Considerations

The preservice students' reflection papers vary from no reflection to dialogic reflection. The main image of the teacher they want to be is the academic and pedagogically skilled and caring teacher. It is the relationship between this teacher

and his/her pupils which is in focus. A good teacher is committed, supportive, affectionate and just, shows social competence, meets the pupils with respect, creates a good class atmosphere, sees all the pupils and last, but not least, is a human being. The focus is on the teacher as a person, not a role, and the relation between teacher and pupil. What is, on the other hand, found lacking in the answers given, is a broader perspective on the teacher's tasks and responsibility. The students' reflections on the teacher they want to become are heavily influenced by their own individual experience of the profession. They describe a line of profession where everything is based on the relationship between themselves and the pupils. Very few reflect on their future practice as teachers in today's society and the traits this entails.

What the descriptions contain and what they lack, can, on the one hand, depend on the way the questions were asked, and that the students have not been given a sufficiently detailed introduction to reflection. But another important explanatory model is the "common-sense"-experiences the students take along with them when they start their education. One of the students illustrates this clearly in the following statement: "The thread through this text has been my experiences as a pupil. The reason for this is, in my own eyes, quite apparent; I have nothing else to base it on." This student is conscious that he/she is using his/her own experiences as a pupil to predict appropriate teacher actions he/she might use, and that these are inadequate grounds.

Lortie (1975) argues that seeing the teacher from a specific vantage point, the pupils' perspective, is just like watching the teacher on stage. They can only see the performance side of teaching. This is similar to Fuller and Brown's (1975) concept of "pre-teaching concerns". Before they have any actual teaching experience, student teachers identify realistically with pupils but idealistically with teachers. Thus, they tend to assess teachers on a wide variety of personal and pupil-oriented bases rather than a pedagogically-oriented framework. A lot of aspects and interpretations of the teacher's work are left out in this pupil-oriented perspective. But what they have generally been viewing and experiencing has been the end product of their teachers' thinking about how to teach a particular content. They have most likely not been privy to the reasons why teaching strategies have, or have not, been employed, why a unit was taught in a particular sequence, or the influence of their learning on the teacher's approach to structuring lessons. Knowles & Holt-Reynolds (1991) maintain that student teachers' beliefs are typically generalizations based on references to themselves in the role of pupils. They exhibit limited ability to place their experiences against a wider, more diverse context or to build imaginary scenarios based on anything other than those events witnessed or experienced in the familiar classroom or school environment.

4. Implications for Teacher Education

Reflective thinking is essential to identifying, analyzing, and solving the complex problems and challenges teachers face in their profession. Teacher educators need to pay particular attention to the way they construct learning experiences to foster the capabilities and attributes that distinguish reflective teachers (Larrivee, 2010). Teacher educators need to find ways of creating opportunities for reflection for student teachers that will enhance their professional learning and development. In doing this it is a challenge to save and cultivate the student teachers' idealism and motivation for teaching and being a good and caring teacher.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this small-scale study. Dewey (1933) proposed that education has to be designed on the basis of a theory of experience. We must understand the nature of how humans have the experiences they do, in order to design effective education. Dewey also reminded us that reflective habits of mind must be taught. The analysis of the teacher students' reflective papers reveals that we cannot assume that students already know how to reflect. In fostering reflection among pre-service teachers, teacher educators must teach reflection, not simply assign reflection. From prior experience, student teachers cannot appreciate the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of teaching as they have developed a rather incomplete and distorted perspective towards teaching. But at the same time, the knowledge culled from prior experience in school is there as a potential resource to be drawn upon throughout teacher education. The challenge here lies in being able to "render visible" previous experiences, unconscious and latent models that students bring with them when they start their teacher training programs, and to work consciously and interactively with the personal and professional processes of student development (Malm, 2009).

Teacher education programs should strive to prepare teachers to be critical thinkers and reflective practitioners. As teacher educators, therefore, we should ourselves be conscious of how we use the concept of reflection, what kind of exercises students are presented with and how we work. In pre-service teacher education programs, some important social and artefactual tools (e.g. journals, seminars and discussions) may be employed to enhance student-teachers' use of reflection. There is much literature that backs up the idea that the actual process of writing in itself is a catalyst for reflection (Martin, 2005). However, this alone is not sufficient for a genuine understanding of reflection in practice. Defining reflection as only an activity to be pursued by the students in individual assignments and problem-solving is a serious limitation for personal and professional growth for both teacher students and educators. We need to teach about

reflection and how to reflect and we have to model and metacommunicate about our own reflections if we want pre-service teachers to become more reflective. Preparing reflective practitioners challenges the traditional higher education “stand and deliver” model of teaching (Larrivee, 2010, p. 140). Loughran underlines the importance of modelling reflection by teacher educators within the context of the student-teachers’ own teaching and learning experiences (Loughran, 1996; Loughran & Berry, 2005). Modelling is about teacher educators “doing” in our practice that which we expect our students to do in their teaching. This means we must model the use of engaging and innovative teaching procedures for our students rather than telling them how to teach in a transmissive approach. Furthermore Loughran and Berry (2005, p. 194) point to the importance of offering our students access to the pedagogical reasoning, feelings, thoughts and actions that accompany our practice. Such access can be made available in a variety of ways; through “thinking aloud” (Loughran, 1996), journaling, discussions during and after class (Berry & Loughran, 2002), and, through the questioning, probing and inquiry during our shared teaching and learning experiences. According to Loughran and Berry (2005, p. 194) accessing these views is offering prospective teachers a form of meta-learning; learning beyond the immediate, and uncovering learning about the learning and teaching being experienced.

Student teachers need to encounter knowledge, tasks and learning situations that defy and contradict their common sense assumptions, and that not only result in extensions and variations over already acquired beliefs (Kvernbekk, 2001). Thereby they can start their journey towards growing into professional teachers.

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