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ABSTRACT

This study examined reflective thinking as it is related to instructional and personality characteristics of effective teachers. During semistructured interviews, 42 first-year elementary school teachers identified characteristics of effective teachers and preservice activities that, for them, were significantly related to professional development. The predominantly white, female participants represented three very different undergraduate academic institutions and a variety of public school teaching assignments. The study involved participant interviews during the final month of the first year of teaching. Interviews focused on issues of effective teaching, personal efficacy, and professional development. Followup questionnaires clarified the issues. Results from one-way classification Chi-square tests indicated that there were several personality characteristics significantly related to effective teaching. Specifically, for these novice teachers, the effective practitioner was a caring, committed, highly creative, proficient reflective thinker with a strong internal locus of control. These characteristics were not isolated traits but instead were related. Participants identified six preservice activities that may maximize growth in technical expertise, teaching artistry, and reflective thinking: clinical field experiences during methods and foundations courses, microteaching lessons, video analyses of student teaching performances, weekly seminars for preservice teachers during full-time student teaching, reflective journals, and professor-modeled reflective thinking. (Contains 28 references.) (Author/SM)

Learning from First Year Teachers:
Characteristics of the Effective Practitioner

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine reflective thinking as it related to instructional and personality characteristics of an effective teacher. During semistructured interviews, 42 first year elementary school teachers identified (a) characteristics of an effective teacher and (b) preservice activities which, for them, were significantly related to professional development. These 42 participants represented three very different undergraduate academic institutions as well as a variety of public school teaching assignments.

Comments from participant interviews and results from one-way classification Chi Square tests ($p \leq .05$) indicated several personality characteristics to be significantly related to effective teaching. Specifically, for these novice teachers, the effective practitioner was a caring, committed, highly creative, proficient reflective thinker with a strong internal locus of control. Furthermore, these characteristics were not isolated traits; they were, in Jessica's[1] words, "definitely related." Finally, qualitative data from this study identified six preservice activities which may maximize growth in technical expertise, teaching artistry, and reflective thinking. Hopefully, such information will assist teacher educators in implementing the principles of effective teaching and reflective practice.

Learning from First Year Teachers: Characteristics of the Effective Practitioner

Despite seeming similarities and differences, teacher education programs have traditionally shared a common goal -- that of preparing effective practitioners. In preparing these effective practitioners, teacher educators typically have focused on the development of particular, verifiable teaching skills, skills which had been empirically related to increased student achievement (Moore, 1988; Richardson, 1990).

However, during the past three decades, demographic changes have altered the profiles of countless families, the educational needs of their children, and the school and community environments (Ogle, 1991). Equipped with repertoires of specific teaching skills, many teachers have been unprepared to adapt their instructional behaviors and materials to meet the challenges of today's diverse student populations (Elkind, 1995; Hyun & Marshall, 1996). Low student achievement and pervasive teacher frustration are logical consequences of this incongruity between teacher and context.

Teacher education programs simply cannot address every student and every situation a prospective teacher will encounter. Rather, they must provide preservice teachers with a general knowledge base of effective teaching principles and practices and a strategy for adapting these principles and practices. For many teacher educators, John Dewey's model of reflective practice is

that strategy of adaptation (Hillkirk & Dupuis, 1989; Smith, 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Reflective practice is a disciplined inquiry into the contexts, goals, motives, methods, materials, and consequences of educational practice. It enables practitioners to thoughtfully examine conditions and attitudes which may impede or enhance student achievement. Reflective teachers

(a) respond to the unique educational and emotional needs of individual students;

(b) question personal aims and actions;

(c) constantly review instructional goals, methods, and materials;

(d) augment technical expertise with personal insights and artistry;

(e) consider the consequences of any proposed plan, the short-term and long-term effects of suggested behaviors;

(f) regularly discuss educational problems, situations, and issues with colleagues;

(g) generate new knowledge about teaching and learning; and

(h) participate in appropriate curriculum and school reform movements (Dewey, 1909/1933; Pollard & Tann, 1987; Schon, 1983, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

The paradigm of reflective practice is hardly a new one. In his seminal work, How We Think, first published in 1909, John Dewey explained the concepts of reflective thinking and teaching.

Reflective thinking, Dewey wrote, emphasizes the consequences of ideas and implies future physical action. It is not merely an exercise in theoretical manipulation or intellectual entertainment (Dewey, 1909/1933). Using methods of rational, systematic inquiry, the reflective person is able to confront and solve a variety of personal and professional obstacles; to be a proactive force in his/her environment.

In nurturing and sustaining habits of reflective thought, Dewey advocated the cultivation of three attitudes: openmindedness, whole-heartedness, and intellectual responsibility. "Openmindedness" (Dewey, 1909/1933, p. 30), the first of these desired attitudes, implies an intellectual receptiveness, a willingness to dispassionately consider multiple and novel ideas. Such openmindedness is accompanied by a sense of convergent attention or "whole-heartedness" (Dewey, 1909/1933, p. 31). All of the individual's mental, emotional, and physical resources are committed to the resolution of the problem. Ultimately, though, these admirable qualities of openmindedness and whole-heartedness are dangerous if not tempered by notions of "intellectual responsibility" (Dewey, 1909/1933, p. 32). Intellectual responsibility insists the reflective thinker consider the consequences of any proposed plan, the short-term and long-term effects of suggested behaviors.

Donald Schon, among others, has corroborated and expanded Dewey's observations on reflective thinking in his books, The Reflective Practitioner and Educating the Reflective Practitioner

(Schon, 1983, 1987). The truly effective, reflective practitioner, Schon argues, must augment technical expertise with personal insights and artistry (Schon, 1983, 1987). All situations are unique problems the practitioner must face. Solutions to these problems often lie outside the realm of existing professional knowledge; thus, the necessity for problem solving artistry or reflective practice.

The importance of this study lies in its attempts to

(a) extend current knowledge about effective teaching and reflective thinking;

(b) affirm and utilize the valuable experiential knowledge of classroom teachers, particularly the fresh insights of first year veterans; and

(c) promote effective teaching and reflective thinking strategies in programs of teacher education.

Hopefully, such information will assist teacher educators in implementing the principles of effective teaching and reflective practice.

Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to examine reflective thinking as it related to instructional and personality characteristics of an effective teacher. Three broad questions guided the interviews and subsequent questionnaires.

1. Based on your first year of teaching, what do you think are the characteristics of an effective teacher?

2. How important is it for an effective teacher to demonstrate these characteristics?
3. Which preservice activities would you suggest to assist beginning teachers in becoming more effective in the classroom?

Extensive previous research has documented the instructional behaviors of an effective teacher. (See Brophy & Good, 1985 and Porter & Brophy, 1988 for an excellent synthesis of this considerable body of knowledge.) Fewer and much smaller studies have focused on the personality characteristics of an effective teacher. Exploratory investigations in this relatively new field of research suggested

(a) teacher flexibility,
(b) creative thinking,
(c) self-concept,
(d) locus of control,
(e) attitudes towards teaching,
(f) ego development,
(g) empathy,
(h) enthusiasm, and
(i) moral reasoning, for examples,

significantly impact student achievement (Getzels & Jackson, 1963; Kagan, Albertson, & Sadler, 1986; Richards, Gipe, Levitov, & Speaker, 1989; Sternberg & Horvath, 1995).

Interestingly, limited research has shown many of these personality characteristics of an effective teacher are related

to reflective thinking. For example, in studies of preservice teachers, results indicated certain individuals do possess personality predispositions to sustained, productive reflection. Such people typically exhibit an internal locus of control and are more curious, creative, spontaneous, sensitive, flexible, and abstract in their thinking than their less reflective peers (Kagan, Albertson, Dick & Sadler, 1986; Norton, 1997; Richards, Gipe, Levitov, & Speaker, 1989).

However, research specifically linking effective teaching and reflective thinking has been sparse and conflicting. For example, Kirby (1987) found reflective thinking, as measured by a 26-item written instrument, was not a significant predictor of teacher effectiveness. Of course, this study was "an initial attempt to operationalize the concept of reflective practice in teaching" (Kirby, 1987, p. 1771) and should be viewed from that perspective. Other studies, using such qualitative techniques as classroom observations and interviews, have reported strong, positive relationships between effective teaching and reflective thinking. In these studies, an effective teacher, one who maximized student achievement and promoted higher-level thinking skills in his/her classroom, was also a reflective, thoughtful practitioner (Onosko, 1992; Porter & Brophy, 1988).

In summary, based on previous research, it was anticipated data from this study would

(a) corroborate and extend existing information on effective teaching and

(b) substantiate a strong, positive relationship between effective teaching and reflective thinking.

Method

The sample used in this study consisted of 42 first year elementary school teachers. These participants represented three very different undergraduate academic institutions as well as a variety of public school teaching assignments.

Each participant was interviewed during the final month of his/her first year of teaching. Interviews highlighted issues of effective teaching, personal efficacy, and professional development. Finally, subjects were asked to complete follow-up questionnaires clarifying these important issues.

Results

Comments from participant interviews and results from one-way classification Chi Square tests ($p \leq .05$) indicated several personality characteristics to be significantly related to effective teaching. Curiously, none of the participants mentioned any instructional techniques essential for effective teaching. When asked about instructional techniques, each participant dismissed them as irrelevant to effective teaching. For these novice teachers, the effective practitioner was a caring, committed, highly creative, proficient reflective thinker with a strong internal locus of control. Furthermore, these characteristics were not isolated traits; they were, in Jessica's[1] words, "definitely related."

Finally, qualitative data from this study identified six preservice activities which may maximize growth in technical expertise, teaching artistry, and reflective thinking. These first year veterans maintained (a) clinical field experiences during methods and foundations courses, (b) microteaching lessons, (c) video analyses of student teaching performances, (d) weekly seminars for preservice teachers during full-time student teaching, (e) reflective journals, and (f) professor-modeled reflective thinking would enhance the education of the effective practitioner.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine reflective thinking as it related to instructional and personality characteristics of an effective teacher. In the following sections, results of the project will be expanded and clarified using selected comments from participant interviews. Specifically, attitudes toward teaching, reflective thinking, creative thinking, and locus of control, all identified as being significantly related to effective teaching, will be discussed.

Attitudes towards Teaching

From the onset of this study, an overwhelmingly majority of the participants stressed the importance of certain attitudes towards teaching in describing an effective practitioner. For example, 95% of these first year veterans maintained an effective teacher demonstrates genuine affection and respect for his/her students. An effective teacher cares. Additionally, 93% of the

subjects noted the effective teacher's strong commitment to teaching. For a significant number of the sample, both caring and commitment to teaching were considered very important characteristics of the ideal teacher ($X^2 = 31.857$, df = 2, $p \leq .0005$ and $X^2 = 29.714$, df = 2, $p \leq .0005$, respectively).

However, according to these first year veterans, such care and commitment cannot be taught or developed in a teacher education program. As Samuel laughingly observed,

> You either get a kick out of teaching those hyper, little hooligans [middle school students] or you don't. . . and no teacher ed program can change your mind about that!

Reflective Thinking

Many of the subjects (86%) identified reflective thinking as a characteristic of an effective teacher. Furthermore, a significant number of them indicated it was very important for an effective teacher to be a reflective one ($X^2 = 41.333$, df = 4, $p \leq .0005$). A reflective teacher "sees beyond the immediate" (Laura) and helps [her] students see beyond the classroom.

> Times change, people change, everything changes. . . and if you're not a reflective teacher, you don't change with them. And, you're not going to be effective if you don't change. You have to be ready and willing to adapt to these changes. (Harriett)

The association between effective teaching and reflective thinking became even more apparent as participants continued to

describe their ideal, effective practitioner. Specifically, for them, an effective practitioner closely resembled the reflective teacher discussed by Pollard & Tann (1987) and Zeichner & Liston, (1996). For examples, a reflective teacher is responsive to the unique educational and emotional needs of the individual students (Pollard & Tann, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

> A reflective teacher is one, who, all during the day, is checking back and saying, "Did that work? What could I do to help that child?" It's [reflective thinking] an on-going process that you do before you arrive at school, during the school day, and in the evening at home. It's an on-going check of each child's progress. You don't get to the end of the year and find out one of your students can't read. (Trish)

Secondly, a reflective teacher questions personal aims and actions (Pollard & Tann, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

> A reflective teacher can stop and look back upon either what they've done or what they've said and be real honest about the experience. I look back so my next step forward is a better one. A reflective teacher is focused, stays clear on their purpose, and is honest with themselves about the quality of the education they are providing. (Pat)

And, a reflective teacher constantly reviews instructional goals, methods, and materials (Pollard & Tann, 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

> [She] is continually trying to evaluate the situation and improve, to see what needs to be changed and what can be changed. Other teachers may be grounded in tradition or routine and respond to many different situations with, "I've always done it that way." But, a reflective teacher is always assessing the situation and making amendments when needed. (Wanda)

Creative Thinking

Eighty-eight percent of these former preservice teachers agreed an effective teacher is also a creative one. Interestingly, their descriptions of a creative teacher were reminiscent of Paul Torrance's widely recognized definition of creative thinking, a definition which is the foundation of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1966). Used in over 2,000 studies, this battery of tests highlights three cognitive processes -- fluency, originality, and flexibility -- considered essential for creative thinking (Torrance, 1990).

Flexibility, originality, and fluency were strikingly evident in participants' remarks on creative thinking and teaching. For example, subjects reported a creative teacher is flexible; he/she is a problem-solver and adapter, adapting materials and ideas to meet classroom needs.

> A creative teacher can take whatever's available and make something out of it. You know, if she has bottle caps at home, she can bring those in and use them as counting tools in math. (Sarah)

> A creative teacher finds ways and uses for objects or comments or activities that aren't readily noticeable. Somebody's smart remark in the back of the room isn't just a smart remark; maybe it opens up a new avenue in the discussion. The school can't budget in all you need, so you just have to find a use for everything. You just use what you have to the ultimate. . . creative thinking is finding multiple ways to use everything. (Pat)

Additionally, a creative teacher, one who is cognitively fluent and original, provides an interesting, exciting, stimulating classroom environment.

> [She] is always looking for new, different, and interesting ways to teach the material. A creative teacher tries to incorporate a variety of teaching methods and materials in her lesson plans. (Allison)

> [She] tries to make the hum-drum fun. (Jessica)

Not surprisingly, a significant number of participants said it was very important ($X^2 = 7.429$, $df = 2$, $p \leq .05$) for an effective practitioner to be creative. By modeling creative thinking, teachers encourage their students to be creative, and, by coordinating creative learning activities, teachers foster a love of learning in their pupils.

Some schools provide all these commercial resources,

and that's fine. But, then the child might go home to a family that can't afford all this Fisher-Price stuff. If the child has seen the teacher use ordinary things in the classroom, he or she will say, "Well, I can pick pennies out of my penny jar and use them in my math homework." Modeling creative thinking lets the child see that he or she can be creative, too. (Sarah)

A creative teacher keeps things changing all the time. If you keep things creative and changing all the time, they [students] are never going to know what to expect. . . which means they're, generally, always listening and interested. "What is she going to do next?" If things are old and boring, and the students know what to expect, they're going to tune you out. Especially with younger children, it's important to keep a lot of variety in their day, because we want them to learn to like school and learning. It breaks my heart to hear a third grader say, "I hate school." Somebody hasn't taken the time to show him how learning can be fun. (Harriett)

Locus of Control

Finally, a strong internal locus of control was considered by many participants (71%) to be either an important or very important ($X^2 = 16.000$, df = 2, $p \leq .0005$) characteristic of an effective practitioner.

> With an external locus of control you think things happen because they just happen. You're going to think, "Well, Johnny made an F because Johnny made an F. I had no control over it; it was just Fate!" Whereas, if you have a strong internal locus of control, you're going to look for reasons. "Well, maybe Johnny made an F because I didn't explain it thoroughly." It's especially necessary for someone who's going to work with a lot of different kids from different backgrounds and experiences and whatever to have an internal locus of control. (Sarah)

Its link to effective teaching and reflective thinking was also noted.

> Reflective thinking and an internal locus of control are both part of being an effective teacher. They are intertwined, and they depend on the individual. . . how he or she looks at things. If you think about things and what you (or others) can do to help, you're reflecting. But, at the same time, you're showing an internal locus of control, because you're saying, "This is what I need to do to change things." That's what an effective teacher does. . . he or she wants to change things for the better. . . to do anything to help students succeed. (Trish)

Summary

For these novice teachers, the effective practitioner was a caring, committed, creative, reflective thinker with a strong internal locus of control. The participants insisted these characteristics were not randomly occurring traits. Instead, they are beautifully integrated in the image of the ideal teacher. Each characteristic supports and extends the others; each characteristic forges theoretical principles and experiential knowledge; and each characteristic stimulates and refines the skills of the effective practitioner. As Pat concluded,

> Of course, all of these things are related! You know, Janet, I have a degree in chemical engineering from Georgia Tech and worked for a major chemical company for a few years. The job was comfortable, the money was **TERRIFIC**, but something was missing. And, I knew what that something was. . . kiddos. I had worked with kids for years. . . giving swimming lessons at the Y, being a volunteer at the Special Olympics. . . Heck, when I was in college I even had a girl scout troop! So, I knew I needed to be with kids full-time. The whole engineering thing was for my father, not me. Do I care?! Am I committed to teaching?! You bet! If I didn't care. . . or was half-hearted in my commitment, I'd be back in the chem lab. . . with state-of-the-art working conditions, prestige, and big bucks!

Now about those other characteristics. Take locus of control. . . Because I have an internal locus of control, I am inclined to reflect on my actions. So there's a direct relationship there as far as I'm concerned. If I'm constantly blaming other people or having other people or other things be responsible for my actions, why in the world would I ever consider reflecting? I'd be sunbathing and reading books!

Also, reflective thinking, I think, enhances creativity. If I'm reflecting, and I think back to something, and I go, "Wow, that didn't work," or "That didn't work as well as I'd hoped," that automatically shuts off certain possibilities, and I've got to open up new ones. It's like erasing a blackboard. It's scary to think about, but from nothing, everything is possible. If I have my blackboard cluttered with ideas that <u>don't</u> work, <u>didn't</u> work, and <u>never</u> <u>will</u> work, then there's not as much room for new possibilities. So, I would say that by being reflective I can go ahead and clean my blackboard a little more often and open up all new areas to be creative. I have more room for ideas. . . more room for fluency, originality, and flexibility.

It's probably like a chain reaction between them [all of these]. Really, I can't imagine a person with an external locus of control taking time to reflect.

And, if you don't reflect, how can you be creative? You haven't thought about other ideas you've seen in the past, things you've read about, and ways to make experiences better.

Implications for Teacher Education

The main purpose of this study was to examine reflective thinking as it related to characteristics of an effective teacher. However, findings from this study must be interpreted with three important realities in mind. First of all, the sample was composed of mostly white, middle-to-upper class females. Secondly, subjects graduated from three different academic institutions, institutions often advocating and implementing strikingly different perspectives, programs, and activities. Finally, participants had completed their first years of teaching in a variety of educational settings. Predominately white, suburban schools; urban, minority schools; mostly white, rural schools, and culturally diverse suburban schools were all represented in this study. For many teacher educators, these realities will only enhance the credibility of the study's findings. Others may view these same realities as limitations to the generalizability of the results to other preservice and/or teacher populations.

Regardless of their varied academic preparations and teaching assignments, these first year veterans agreed on several proposed changes in teacher education. Participants suggested six preservice activities which, for them, were significantly

($p \leq .0005$) related to growth in effective, reflective professional practice. These activities, they indicated, provided opportunities to practice, refine, and reinforce creative thinking, reflective thinking, and/or an internal locus of control, all characteristics of their ideal effective practitioner. Specifically, these first year veterans maintained (a) clinical field experiences during methods and foundations courses, (b) microteaching lessons, (c) video analyses of student teaching performances, (d) weekly seminars for preservice teachers during full-time student teaching, (e) reflective journals, and (f) professor-modeled reflective thinking would enhance the education of the effective practitioner.

Directions for Future Research

Results from this study indicated reflective thinking, as well as creative thinking, locus of control, and attitudes towards teaching, was a significant characteristic of an effective practitioner as described by first year veteran teachers. However, even though the paradigm of reflective practice may answer many professional needs and questions regarding effective teaching, it simultaneously raises concerns and issues for further consideration and research. This study alone identified three broad research questions, questions which must be answered if Schon's effective, reflective practitioner is to become the norm rather than the exception in educational communities (Schon, 1983, 1987).

First of all, does increased reflection actually enhance classroom performance? Are reflective, thoughtful, analytical teachers more effective in promoting a student's emotional, physical, moral, and cognitive growth than their unreflective, complacent, routine-bound colleagues? Preliminary studies into the relationship between reflective thinking and effective teaching have been promising. Several qualitative studies, including this one, have reported a strong, positive relationship between the two variables. In these studies, an effective teacher, one who maximized student achievement and promoted higher-level thinking skills in his/her classroom, was also a reflective, thoughtful practitioner (Onosko, 1992; Porter & Brophy, 1988). However, more research on the relationship between effective teaching and reflective thinking is certainly needed.

Secondly, once the association between reflective thinking and effective teaching has been empirically and qualitatively verified, means of predicting reflective thought may then be explored. Are there certain program, personality, and/or cognitive variables that can predict the presence or absence of attitudes of reflective practice? Can a preservice teacher with an inclination towards reflective inquiry be identified by a particular personal and/or intellectual characteristic? Or, does the habit of reflective thinking emerge only with age and experience? Ideally, if initial predispositions towards reflective thinking in preservice teachers could be identified,

then teacher educators could structure appropriate reflective activities for each group.

Finally, how is reflective practice identified in the classroom? Structured interviews, dialogue journal entries, and written philosophies of education, for examples, are frequently used to measure reflective thinking (Hillkirk, 1987). However, these avenues ultimately fail to target actual behaviors in the classroom that connote a reflective orientation. An observation tool, to be used by the evaluator or researcher during an actual classroom visit, would provide a more direct means of determining reflective practice. Jadallah (1984) and Lambert (1976), to name a few, have developed and pilot-tested such instruments, but more research is needed before these reflective teaching observation instruments gain widespread acceptance. Or, perhaps reflective practice is not a concept which may be empirically measured by an observation tool. In a recent study on reflective theory and practice, Jadallah (1996) appears to have abandoned attempts to measure reflective teaching using an observation instrument. Rather, he used "analysis of six preservice teachers' lesson plans, reflective analysis papers, videotaped lesson, and interviews" (p. 73) to identify and understand participants' reflective thinking.

Finally, results from this particular study merit further investigation.

1. Is there a relationship between the effective teaching strategies identified by these first year veterans and their teacher education curricula?
2. Is there a relationship between the effective teaching strategies identified by these first year veterans and aspects of their public school settings?
3. Is there a relationship between the effective teaching strategies identified by these first year veterans and prior teaching experiences?
4. Is there a relationship between the effective teaching strategies identified by these first year veterans and their ages?
5. What are the most effective means of incorporating additional field components into the teacher education program?
6. How may the use of microteaching lessons be enhanced?
7. What are the most effective means of employing videotape analyses into the teacher education program?
8. How may the weekly student teaching seminar be structured and conducted to promote reflective thinking and effective teaching strategies?
9. What are essential components of provocative dialogue journal writing, writing which stimulates personal and professional growth?

These major research questions, though vital to a more complete understanding of reflective practice and effective

teaching strategies, are, ultimately, catalysts for future study. In fact, effective educational practice demands the on-going reflective cycle of assessment, research, implementation, and evaluation. Why?

> Clearly, everyone who has ever been engaged in teaching knows that it is a thinking process. Effective teaching requires constant evaluation of one's beliefs in light of one's classroom behaviors -- and constant evaluation of one's classroom behaviors in light of the student outcomes for which one is aiming. Good teachers never reach stasis; they are always striving to "do it" better. (Gough, 1996. p. 459)

As teacher educators, it is our responsibility and privilege to help them "do it" better.

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Footnotes

[1]All participant and place names were changed to assure the anonymity of each person and the confidentiality of the study.

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