

The 'R' Word in Teacher Education: Understanding the Teaching and Learning of Critical Reflective Practice

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Abstract

The case for critical reflective practice (CRP) among teachers has been advocated for some time. Reflective practice is now at the heart of a number of teacher education programmes and is regarded as an important element in the preparation of new teachers. While it is clear that CRP is highly regarded by teacher educators, less clear is whether new teachers have the strategies necessary to reflect effectively, and whether they understand the potential benefits of reflective practice. This study compares pre-service teacher candidates and faculty members' understanding of critical reflective practice. The findings suggest that students' understandings are shaped by their primary motivations to learn-which are to complete the programme successfully and survive the challenges of day-to-day teaching. Faculty members' understandings and teaching emphases are well beyond this survival stage. The disparity in motivation draws attention to the need to alter faculty members' approach to teaching CRP. Otherwise, students report that they simply 'go through the motions' with regard to assignments.

Introduction

This study examines the role of critical reflection in teacher education in an Ontario pre-service programme. The intent of this study is to contribute to understanding the challenges involved in preparing 'reflective practitioners'. The aim is first, to understand critical reflective practice (CRP) from the perspective of faculty, second to hear the lived experience of students preparing to become teachers, and third to examine the students' engagement with the strategies aimed at making them 'reflective practitioners'. It is anticipated that the results can be used to assist in the adaptation and/or the development of models of implementing CRP in teacher education programmes. This can enhance new teachers' induction to the profession and beyond.

Since the nature of the context might be expected to influence the way in which critical reflection is considered within the pre-service programme, certain characteristics of the programme should be noted. The programme is a consecutive Bachelor of Education, conducted over a one-year period to prepare approximately 700 teacher candidates. For the purposes of the study, the focus was on those candidates the Junior, Intermediate, and Senior divisions (Grades 4-12). All candidates must have an undergraduate degree that includes courses in the candidate's teachable subject(s) as a minimum entry requirement. Candidates are selected on the basis of their undergraduate attainment and their personal profile. The institution employs approximately 40-45 fulltime faculty members in the implementation of the programme. The programme also places a significant emphasis on practicum placements and works closely with local and regional school boards to ensure that student teachers get appropriate opportunities to develop their skills in the classroom.

Literature Review

Dewey (1933), Habermas (1971), Van Manen (1977), and Schön (1983) led the way in attempting to define reflection for particular purposes. Dewey and Habermas had, as central to their theories on reflective practice, the idea that reflection generates new knowledge. Attempting to define 'reflection', however, may be as complex as each of the individuals who attempt to implement it in their professional lives. For example, while Hatton and Smith (1995) described reflection as "a deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement" (p.34), Sparks-Langer, (1992) indicated that there does not appear to be a single definition of reflective practice in the literature.

Moon (1999) indicated, "Part of the common understanding of the term is that reflective capacity varies among individuals and develops with age but also within an educationally stimulating environment" (p.3). In an attempt to capture the meaning of reflection in common language, Moon further suggested that the word implies "a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or an anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution" (p.4). This would appear to be consistent with Loughran's (1996) notion that reflection is a "purposeful, deliberate act of inquiry into one's thoughts and actions through which a perceived problem is examined in order that a thoughtful, reasoned response might be tested out" (p.2). As it pertains to teachers and teacher education, Schön (1983, 1996) introduced the concept of reflective practice as a means of continuous improvement for educators and other professionals. The broadly-defined process involves cycles of thoughtfully considering the effectiveness of practice, taking steps to improve practice, and assessing the effectiveness of those efforts, often in conjunction with other professionals with complementary experience (Ferraro, 2000).

It may be generally accepted that critical reflective practice (CRP) is an important component of initial teacher education, and can provide a vehicle whereby tacit knowledge possessed by teachers can be transformed into explicit knowledge. Indeed, according to Zeichner and Liston (1987), it allows teachers to "have control over the content and processes of their own work" (p. 26). In their later work, Zeichner and Liston (1996) presented five features that they consider to be key in reflective teachers. They include teachers who:

1. examine, frame and attempt to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice;
2. are aware of and question the assumptions and values they bring to teaching;
3. are attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which they teach;
4. take part in curriculum development and school change efforts; and
5. take responsibility for their own professional development. (p.6)

Zeichner and Liston went on to argue that reflective teaching also includes dispositions such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility in addition to abilities such as analysing, summarizing, and judging information.

The case for CRP among a variety of practitioners has been advocated for some time (see Schön, 1983; Gore and Zeichner, 1991; Eraut, 1995; Edge, 2001). Many years ago, Dewey (1933) suggested that learning to teach must include opportunities for new teachers to develop the capacity for reflective action. More recently, in teacher education, it has been acclaimed as a goal in many programmes (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Furthermore, Bartlett (1990) suggested that initial teacher training involves more than skills and competencies, and that teachers need to be equipped with the tools that will enable them to analyse their own classroom practices and make adjustments to the teaching and learning environment.

While there appears to be a well-supported case for reflective practice being a critical component in pre-service programmes, Russell (2005) stated, "The absence of any clear agreement about what reflective practice is and how we recognize it helps us to understand why it is not clear how to teach it" (p.200). He recommended that it "can and should be taught -explicitly, directly, thoughtfully, and patiently-using personal reflection-in-action to interpret and improve one's teaching of reflective practice to others" (p.204). In the context of developing reflective practitioners, Alger (2006) suggested that reflection could be fostered through activities such as action research, case studies, microteaching and reflective writing assignments. Park (2003) identified reflective journals as potentially valuable tools for developing critically reflective practitioners. He claimed that the journaling process did a number of things including stimulating critical thinking, allowing teacher educators some insights into the minds of the candidates, and helping the candidates to understand better, the process of learning.

Hobbs (2007) identified some problems with reflective journals that were assessed and suggested that reflections should not be assessed in the early stages; only after individuals have had significant experience. She went on to provide suggestions for gaining that experience (p.415). Hargreaves (2004), however, argued that requiring reflection for assessment purposes may not be a positive learning strategy and that reflections should be required but not assessed.

In examining what reflection does in relation to teachers, Hussein (2007, p.189) claimed that it enables them:

...to analyze, discuss, evaluate and change their own practice, adopting an analytical approach towards their practice, and encourages them to appraise the moral and ethical issues implicit in classroom practices, including the critical examination of their own beliefs about good teaching.

More recently, Hannay, Wideman, and Seller (2007) describe work that has been done to develop and support a knowledge creation approach to professional learning and school improvement that integrates reflection with action, the use of data, and collegial dialogue, and supports teachers in "how to reflect."

In addition, Russell (2005) claimed, "...initial teacher education continues to espouse the importance of reflective practice" (p.199-200). Teacher educators, therefore, are in a unique position to develop the critical reflective practitioners of the future, and student teachers in initial teacher education programmes are well placed to become those reflective practitioners.

Thomas (1983) defined learning as a natural, cumulative activity in which an individual engages to meet felt needs by changing him or herself in some way. Tough (1971, 1978, 1982) saw individuals frequently engaging in this kind of investigative learning project, actively seeking out, creating, and applying knowledge related to some personally-important topic, problem, or task. Houle (1980) concluded that investigation was an important method of ongoing learning by individuals in the professions. Reflecting on one's practice - as it is, as one wishes it to be, and as one sees it developing or changing - is a fundamental component of investigative approaches to professional learning (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2007).

Classic literature on adult learning supports the notion that learning is motivated by felt needs many of which may be work-related. Knowles (1973) wrote that most effective learning activities support the individual's current work-roles and problems. Wood and Thompson (1980) saw adults learning, retaining and using what they perceived to be relevant to their professional needs. Tough (1971, 1978, 1982) found that many adult learning projects related to some responsibility, such as a job. Many focussed on learning needed to improve practice, for example to maintain or upgrade job-related competence. In many cases, projects were initiated by the need to make a decision, solve a problem, or handle a case.

Beginning teachers in pre-service programs are likely to be motivated to focus their learning activities on different kinds of topics or problems than their faculty instructors. Thomas (1985) identified four learning occasions to which employees respond and for which organizations provide educational support. The four are entry, promotion, company-wide change, and special problems. Pre-service teachers are just at the point of entering the profession; hence the work-related problems that may stimulate their learning (e.g., lesson planning, classroom management, posing questions) are likely to be different or at least framed differently than those of a highly experienced faculty members with many years in the profession. Further, Maslow (1943) postulated a hierarchy of human needs with physiological and safety needs the lowest levels and self-actualization the highest. Since adult learning is motivated by perceived needs, it follows that pre-service teachers may focus their learning on their need to survive in the pre-service program or in their early years of teaching,

While the learning of pre-service teachers may be focused on the need to earn marks and pass courses that are part of their program, much learning is also motivated by the need to do well in their practice teaching. In her study of thirty teachers and reflection, D'Andrea (1986) found that teachers' learning was initiated by a triggering experience which produced cognitive conflict and strong emotions that were usually unpleasant. The triggering experience was one that had unexpected meaning for the teacher in that it raised disparity between what the teacher had expected and what the experience actually held. D'Andrea concluded that what was a triggering experience for one person was not for another. The event was significant, not in itself, but in terms of the meaning it had for the individual. Teachers in D'Andrea's study reported that the triggering experience usually had to do with the behaviour of those around them. About two thirds of the teachers in her study reported that their triggering experiences involved students, faculty members, or administrators.

Purposes of the Study

Given Russell's (2005) assertion that teacher educators are in a unique position to develop the critical reflective practitioners of the future, the main purpose of this study, was to examine critical reflective practice (CRP) within a teacher education programme with a view to establishing its current role within the programme, the importance attached to it by faculty and student teachers, and the ways in which it is being taught and developed in the teacher candidates. The specific objectives in this study were to:

1. investigate understandings of CRP;
2. consider the reasons for CRP;
3. examine the strategies used to promote CRP; and
4. identify the benefits of CRP.

Methodology

The study used qualitative methodology, where the participants are regarded as "key informants" or people who are excellent sources and who have the information necessary to answer the research questions (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p.458). The site was chosen purposefully as the researchers knew it to be 'information rich' (Patton, 1990, p.169). That is, critical reflective practice (CRP) is a significant and articulated element in the pre-service programme.

Research Participants

In total, nineteen students and fifteen faculty members participated in the study. The student sample was drawn from the Junior, Intermediate and Senior divisions' teacher candidates who were completing their pre-service education programme in the year the study was conducted. The faculty sample was drawn from those who were teaching the students in the programme. A random selection process was designed to elicit relatively equal numbers of male and female students selected from comparable teachable subjects.

Data Collection

The data were collected through focus group interviews. All group interactions and interviews were tape-recorded for accuracy and clarity. All participants were volunteers. The focus group sessions were framed around the following questions:

- What is your understanding of critical reflective practice?
- Why critically reflect?
- What strategies are used to promote critical reflective practice?
- What are the benefits of critical reflective practice?

Focus Groups

The purpose of focus group interviewing is to hear the voices of "key informants" who understand the culture and who are willing and able to reflect on it, and to articulate what is going on in terms of their own professional practice (Dexter, 1970). The method is well suited to obtaining different perspectives about the same issue. The discussion is conducted with selected groups to access these perspectives and to gain insights into their shared understandings of their everyday experiences (Gibbs, 1997). Ground rules are established that create an emotionally safe environment for discussion in which all voices may be heard. The moderator remains neutral and avoids giving personal opinions that might influence participants' comments.

Powell and Single (1996) defined a focus group as, "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment, from personal experience, on the topic that is the subject of the research" (p.499). Focus groups are a form of group interviewing but are distinguished by the fact that the researcher relies not on questions and answers between the participants and the researcher, but rather on "the interaction within the group-based topics that are supplied by the researcher" (Morgan, 1997, p.12). The key characteristic is the "insights and data produced by the interaction between participants" (Gibbs, 1997, p.2). In this study, the perspectives of both student teachers and their faculty members were considered vitally important. As suggested by Gibbs (op cit.), the focus groups allowed the researchers to access the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and reactions of participants in ways that observations or surveys could not. It was recognized, however, that some individuals may not be confident

enough to express an opinion in a context that is not fully confidential. For this reason, it was considered important to have separate groups for faculties and students in an attempt to address this possibility.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis processes used in this study involved stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data reduction included selecting, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data through coding, and writing summaries and memoranda. Data display included the organized assembly of information to facilitate drawing conclusions, through narrative text, matrices, and networks. Conclusion drawing involved deciding what things meant in regard to the research questions and proceeded primarily from the various data displays. Verification involved testing the sturdiness and confirmability of the findings through a process of triangulation in which information from the various sources were compared.

Initially, each individual researcher analyzed the data from the pre-service programme studied, coding the data under each of the focus group questions, and looking for categories that reflected similarities and differences between the comments of the faculty and the students. Once this was accomplished, the four researchers met together to review the respective analyses to develop a shared list of categories that reflected similarities and differences in the data. The resulting categories illuminated some of the literature on reflective practice.

Findings and Discussion

Findings of the study are organized according to the original research objectives stated earlier in the paper. Embedded in students' and faculty's understanding is their interpretation of why and how they reflect along with the benefits of reflecting. These will serve as general categories for comparison of understanding between the two groups. Responses are coded as (S) for student and (F) for faculty.

Understandings of Reflective Practice

Student Responses

In analyzing the data with regard to understandings of CRP, students viewed CRP as a tool that assisted them in surviving the challenges of day to day teaching and therefore completing the practical aspects of the programme. Two themes emerged from the student responses:

1. CRP was viewed as a response to critical incidents which had occurred while teaching. Typically, these responses related to classroom management situations for which the teachers' particular level of professional knowledge had not yet prepared them. Their reflection entailed the development of strategies to attempt to understand the situation and ensure such incidents would not occur again. Their thinking focused on what went well and what could have been done differently. Evaluation and improvement are at the centre of their reflections.
2. CRP was seen as informing the planning process through which teacher candidates prepared and evaluated the pedagogy of daily lessons. Generally this took the form of the written lesson plans which the faculty required students to prepare prior to each lesson taught. Included in these plans was a 'reflection section' that was to be completed at the end of each day.

Each of the themes involves student teachers thinking insightfully and deeply pertaining to their primary motivation for learning- survival and success- and is characterized by an enhanced understanding of classroom practice. In (S1) below, for example, it is evident that the respondent is focusing on what went well and on ways of changing existing practices to bring about improvement.

(S1)

I think it's important, too, not always to reflect on the negative, but to reflect on the positive as well, and I found that I constantly was judging myself, things that I did wrong, things that I didn't do right, and sometimes I think it's important to sit back and think of the things you actually did right, so that you can carry those on into your future lessons as well.

Here, there is a sense that understanding and doing CRP are determined by the format of the 'official' documentation, in this case, a lesson-plan. Completing the 'evaluation at the end of each lesson-plan' is evidence that reflection has taken place and that institutional requirements have been met. Clearly, however, there is far more to CRP than this.

In contrast, (2) below illustrates CRP as a process emphasizing longer term professional awareness and development.

(S2)

I think it [CRP] also deals with your personal strengths and your personal goals, not just with how it reflects on the classroom. You can also look back and compare them with each other.... which will help you improve in the classroom.

This view of CRP places considerable emphasis on its longitudinal nature, on the importance of reflection at a slight distance and on the actions which ensue from the reflection. It suggests that, for CRP to be successful, it has to be ongoing, cyclical, comparative, and involve analysis and synthesis of what is observed.

Faculty Responses

Although faculty also mentioned the need to reflect upon each lesson and each placement with regards to "what went well?", and "what did not go well?", their responses moved in a direction that was largely absent in the students' responses. There was the sense that teacher cognition is concerned with the beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge which largely determine professional practice. Faculty focused more on personal experiences, life histories, and how these affected teachers' perceptions of teaching. Typical responses are shown in (4) and (5):

(F4)

For me reflective practice is looking at what I do in the classroom based on my continuum of experience. How I might have done it differently in the past, and why that changes in the stories that I bring to what I do in the classroom. Essentially, looking at what I do based within the paradigm within which I teach and trying to identify the tasks, the understandings, and make them more explicit with regard to what I do in the classroom.

(F5)

Looking at the experiences we bring to the classroom like images of other teachers, experiences that they've had that they don't even recognize impact upon their practice, and so when I say going deeper with reflective practice, I mean really taking a look at the stories that they bring to the classroom and how that impacts on what they do every day as opposed to just what went well and what didn't go well.

The disparities between the students' and faculty members' understanding of CRP is clearly evident from the examples provided. There is little debate as to the need to investigate teachers' 'lived experiences' and their effect on individual teaching. What appears to be open for debate is the readiness of pre-service teachers to investigate this component of their teaching. Again, the student teachers are concerned with the mechanics of the lesson and the practicum placement. They reiterate the importance of survival within the classroom context, not attempting to link this survival with their predisposed pedagogical ideology. The participants' responses appear to fit into two distinct categories; while the students are overwhelmingly referring to CRP as a response to an event or a series of events, faculty see it as a continuum whereby teachers undergo a process of understanding from where they have come and how this impacts on their effectiveness as teachers.

Reasons for Critical Reflection

Student Response

At times, the approach to CRP, we suggest, is driven by students' perceived need to meet the assessment criteria of the programme, in short, to ensure that students 'pass'- see (S6) and (S7) below. There is considerable evidence (see, for example, Biggs, 2003) that 'surface' learning occurs when learners and teachers are concerned primarily to

meet the assessment criteria of a module. Rather than achieving deeper understandings, students are content to adopt a strategic approach to learning and ensure they 'pass'.

(S6)

Sometimes I don't really see the relevancy to reflect on some of the assignments we do, and therefore, really, all I'm doing is I am writing up something that may or may not be my actual opinion, I'm just writing something up to hand something in. I find that happens more often than maybe you'd like.

(S7)

Well, I always think that there is a personal gain to doing reflective practices, but, I found myself when I was writing my reflections at night [after a day of practice teaching] that I was thinking of, okay, what did they want to see in my reflections, rather than what do I want to see in myself.

On one level, this approach to CRP can be interpreted as 'satisfying institutional requirements.' Here, the concern of both faculty and students is to ensure that 'boxes are ticked,' that the administrative demands are met, and that course requirements are achieved. As demonstrated here and later in the paper, the students' repeated frustration with attempting to understand the purpose of such exercises emerges as an important theme contained within their comments.

The student teachers' concern is to 'get it right', to improve, to do things better next time. As it pertains to classroom management (a dominant theme in the responses from students), comments similar to (S8) and (S9) below were reiterated by the student participants, demonstrating their struggles with the fundamental aspects of attempting to develop strategies to control students' behaviour while implementing lessons.

(S8)

The whole idea of reflecting on classroom management comes in when the students start getting rowdy and there are certain techniques that you can use to calm them down, as opposed to just waiting until it escalates and then you having to say that's enough. So, just by reflecting that way, you end up solving a lot of problems before they start. You have to premeditate things are going to happen, that things can happen. And what you're going to do to solve them.

(S9)

The experience that I had was mostly management,... and reflecting on that, it affected my decisions on how to actually get groups to go properly to the back and get stuff and how to let them go one at a time or assign a certain person to go back there and get the utensils they need and then bring it back it to their group, before we could start the actual lesson.

Faculty Response

The responses to the question, "Why do it?" created the greatest sense of disconnect between students and faculty members. Faculty took a very different stance, reporting universally that CRP acted as a 'tool for empowerment' and provided the means to understanding oneself as teacher. Faculty comments appeared to all but ignore the immediate needs of the student teachers. In (F10) below, the faculty member is suggesting that students can create understandings by analyzing their own contexts and acting on that information. From the comments below, this notion of empowerment is characterized by a range of concepts, including "teacher autonomy", "co-constructed meaning", and "emic" (insider) rather than "etic" (outsider) views of a teacher's world.

(F10)

Teacher empowerment is one of the big reasons for doing it. If they (students) could learn that the answers are not only dictated from experts but within themselves, they can also create knowledge to deal with situations within their own contexts.

The notion of empowerment and being able to think for themselves was advocated by some faculty as a means of dealing with change. The educator's comments in (11) confirm that teachers need to be able to handle change and that CRP is central to adapting to new circumstances.

(F11)

The one thing I can't tell them is what it's going to be like in 5-10 years' time when the curriculum changes, society changes and all sorts of things will change. The one skill they absolutely need if they are going to be adaptive is to be able to be reflective .

The comments presented in (F11) demonstrated the apparent gap between student and faculty perceptions of CRP and the reasons for its existence. Students are typically operating at a "survival" level which addresses the "here and now" of their professional lives: how to plan a lesson, how to collect information for an assignment, how to ensure that all written requirements of the programme are completed, and how to gain and maintain the attention of their students. In contrast, and, not surprisingly given their more extensive professional experience, faculty are considering the "bigger picture", operating at a deeper level where CRP is advocated as an artefact which underpins professional practice.

How to Critically Reflect

In addition to a written "reflection" section at the end of each of their taught lessons., students were required to complete a written reflection for particular aspects (classroom design, management...) of their entire placement within their courses at the faculty. Each group of participants identified the written component of the reflections as a one of the strategies that was employed during the teacher training programme. In addition, there were other strategies used, as discussed below.

Student Response

In listening to students comments regarding "How to critically reflect", quite often there were concerns with the need to transcribe reflections into written form. There was a realization (see S12 and S13) that the strategies they were being asked to use in their pre-service year may not be consistent with what they would be able to do once they became teachers.

(S12)

I didn't have time between classes to reflect and write it down, so, that's where the whole mental reflection comes in.... But when you're finished for the day and then you got home and write down your reflections, that doesn't necessarily help with how it went for that day. And, if you had to write things down when you were teaching fulltime that would be impossible.

(S13)

My AT (associate teacher) actually said, "you know, as a teacher, you constantly reflect and revise what you're doing. Maybe it's not necessarily everything written down, but I think they are advocating the use of reflecting constantly..."

Given the teacher candidate's level of professional exposure and sense of being overwhelmed with the daily demands of their practicum, they reported a need to separate themselves from the situation. In (S14) below, the participant indicated the benefits of being able to 'step back' from the classroom experience.

(S14)

I'd talk about things I wanted to do in the classroom, or when I anticipated I wanted to do in the classroom, I wasn't doing anything I was saying I wanted to do. So, the more reflective and constructive stuff I found was when I distanced myself, because it was so chaotic during my practicum with so much work , and so much to do out there, that it's just hard to juggle that many balls and reflect at the same time without the sense of just patchwork.

The students decidedly preferred discussing their teaching with mentors (AT's) and/or peers but, again, felt compelled by the institutional demands to provide written responses in the formal lesson plans.

In (S15), a student teacher identified the benefits of reflection during their coursework and in (S16) the value of having a more experienced set of eyes (the associate teacher or faculty advisor). These components appeared, to many of the teacher candidates, to be instrumental in providing the opportunity to 'step back' from their experiences and view their effectiveness from other perspectives. In listening to their peers and mentors they were able to enlighten their own teaching.

(S15)

One of the things that I really enjoyed was the assignment where we actually did our own personal teaching philosophy why we thought we were here, and after we went through the year, we went back and reflected on what we said originally. I think that was really important to see how you've grown as a teacher and really whether or not you're in the right profession. I think of the assignment and I think that the faculty guidance in analysing it was very important. Listening to others' stories and their changes in the class was great!

(S16)

I didn't think I had the capacity. I feel like my capacity to critically analyze my teaching has grown, and will continue to grow at least for a while, but there are lots of things I didn't notice. I mean my AT would notice and we would talk and she'd say, "Did you know that this kid was doing this while you were doing that?"

Faculty Responses

Faculty members appeared to understand the needs of their students to verbally discuss their teaching experiences and many had built reflective discussion components into their courses (see F17 and F18). They also felt bound by the institutional requirements based upon the practice teaching assessment template. In (F19) one faculty member debates the merits of the written reflections.

(F17)

Not only did they write it (reflections), they have to go away and read, and they themselves pick what they want to reflect on. They write it but then they come back and talk, and I think the talking part is as equally important as the writing part, and they talk with their colleagues in groups of four, and I'm always amazed, as well as the students. I think it's a real eye opener for them.

(F18)

We let our students know that reflection is not something that's done always by yourself. If they can get involved in kind of a collaborative community of learners, it may work for them.

(F19)

I understand their [the students] frustrations with the reflections sometimes and we know that some of them will do them the night before we go in for our evaluation but what are we supposed to do? They are the only proof we have that they are actively thinking about their own teaching. For the lesson I'm observing, I can chat with the student but, given the possible lag in time, recall of previous lessons may not be as available. I don't have anything to gauge their perceptions because I wasn't there to watch previous lessons.

Benefits of CRP

Again, we note with interest that there are more differences than similarities between student and faculty perceptions of the benefits of CRP. While this may not be surprising given the huge differences in knowledge and experience between the two groups, it might be advantageous for a more homogenous perspective to be adopted as a means of ensuring that CRP has its intended impact.

Student Response

In addition to the reasons previously discussed (to improve upon teaching practice, to pass the programme) students offer what we might call a "pragmatic" perspective of CRP when discussing its benefits. For example, one comment which recurred in the data was that CRP can help you get a job or help you to advance in your career. In (S20), this point is exemplified. There is the sense that students understood the importance of being able to 'talk the talk' with regards to educational philosophies when engaging with other professionals.

(S20)

When we go into an interview question, and are asked a question about management or something, how we would handle it, maybe we had that situation, and we had the chance to reflect on it, so for that reason, reflection is good. It will maybe get us a job over somebody else.

Faculty Response

Faculty perceived the benefits of CRP largely in a 'professional idealistic' sense as illustrated in the two sets of comments below:

(F21)

I think the merging of theory and practice is an important aspect of critical reflective practice (FA).

(F22)

We want to make sure our students use reflective practice as a strategy, so that they can continue to grow once they leave the formal structure of our program (FA).

When we consider these two comments, we must acknowledge that they represent laudable aims and few educators would dispute that they underpin the rationale and benefits of CRP. However, to what extent is this perspective communicated to students? Are students aware of the longer term potential value of CRP, or do they see it simply in terms of the programme itself? Some faculty members expressed a professional internal conflict with the expectations of the programme with regards to CRP. In (F23) we hear how one faculty member debates whether we, as teacher educators, should or could be doing a better job at linking the theory to practice and providing the student teachers the opportunity to be better prepared to face their careers.

(F23)

So, I think we, we collect the data well, about what happens, and we think about it, but then I don't know if, if we're as active and persistent at making sure that we're doing the things we need to do to make it better.

Conclusions

In this study, a pre-service teacher education programme was examined as a means of gaining a better understanding of the role of CRP and of identifying strategies used to prepare new teachers to think critically about their own practices. Participants were asked to respond to four key questions: (1) What is meant by CRP? (2) Why would teachers participate in CRP? (3) How do teachers partake in CRP? (4) What are the benefits of CRP?

This particular teacher education programme, like many others, has a strong emphasis on critical reflective practice. This emphasis is summarized nicely in one student's comments, "We've done so much reflecting we're practically prisms (sic)." Unfortunately, the study found that students usually viewed the reflective process as something that must be done to complete the formal requirements of the programme rather than a vehicle by which they can achieve improvement within their chosen profession. A number of trends, based upon each of the research questions, presented themselves in this research:

1. What is meant by CRP?

Students' emphasis was on improvement of teaching, making sense of the career, and attempting to survive the daily demands of their placements. They put a significant importance on reflecting upon classroom management and how it impacts upon the implementation of their planned lessons. Teacher educators shared this understanding but also reported that CRP should include an understanding of self, lived experiences, and the impact the practitioner has on classroom teaching. Faculty stressed the importance of this understanding as an underpinning to growth within oneself and within the profession.

2. Why undertake CRP?

When considering why one undertakes in CRP, students overwhelmingly reported that they do it because they are told they must to successfully complete the programme. They reported a frustration with the apparent disconnect between a number of assignments and their relevance to pre-service teaching and beyond. As a result, there was the tendency to complete these assignments simply to meet the demands of the programme. The institutional and assessment agendas, in the students' eyes, were the driving force for CRP. This position contrasted quite starkly with that adopted by faculty who, almost unanimously, had a more idealistic view of CRP as something which should underpin all professional practice, both in the 'here-and-now' and throughout a teacher's life.. This position clearly coincided with the one advocated in much of the literature on CRP and regards reflection as a tool for promoting understanding, self-development, and professional growth. Faculty clearly justified their approach to providing reflective opportunities. Some faculty reported being bound by the institutional demands, again, ensuring the 'boxes are ticked' in the practice teaching evaluation forms.

3. How is CRP conducted?

When considering how CRP is actually conducted, we noted that the majority of both students and faculty referred to *written* approaches to CRP, such as completing a self-evaluation after teaching or writing an assignment where CRP is evidenced. Students reported a desire to incorporate more breadth of reflective strategies including greater opportunity to conference with peers, associate teachers and faculty advisors through mentorships. There was an appreciation for experience that others bring to the discussions and the relevance of this to fulltime teaching. Faculty members also understand the potential of these partnerships and that CRP has most to offer when underpinned by *oral* strategies, such as talking to a class-mate or colleague, or taking part in a class discussion at the end of teaching practice.

4. What are the benefits of CRP?

Finally, we asked the participants about the perceived benefits of CRP. Here, there was evidence that students adopted a pragmatic view of CRP in relation to their courses of study. Their responses indicated that the greatest benefit of CRP was that it satisfied the requirements of the course. Owing to time constraints once they begin teaching fulltime, students felt it unlikely that CRP could be adopted in its current state of written response. Students also reported the benefit of being able to "talk the educational talk" of reflection during potential job interviews and with colleagues once hired. Faculty, on the other hand, offered a more "professionally idealistic" view of the benefits of CRP, broadly consistent with their comments on the reasons for doing CRP.

Recommendations

Based on the data collected in this study, we offer a number of tentative recommendations and implications:

1. Faculty must pay greater attention to the needs of the teacher candidates. There must be an effort undertaken to reduce the 'gap' between student and faculty perceptions of CRP. In particular, faculty must acknowledge and appreciate the students' motivation- namely, survival in courses and practice teaching placements. There would be benefit in faculty bridging between student perceived needs and deeper conceptualizations pertaining to CRP, for example, providing more insights into CRP as a tool for improving professional practice and as a means of becoming a teacher-researcher in the true sense of the word. Put differently, faculty could do more to promote the benefits of their assignments and the relevance to students' immediate concerns and future use in their careers. This should include demonstrating how teachers might become researchers of their own classrooms (Whitehead, 1993; Delong, Black, & Wideman, 2005).
2. More could be done to modify the idea of CRP as an institutional or assessment requirement. Student-teachers need to be persuaded of the value of CRP in its own right and be given strategies for conducting CRP. One way of

achieving this might be to reduce the emphasis on written evidence of reflection and encourage a more collaborative and dialogic approach to reflective processes (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2007).

3. Student-teachers clearly need to learn *how* to introspect, describe, understand, and evaluate learning and teaching processes. Much could be done to develop appropriate *tools* for conducting CRP such as found in action research, mentoring, peer coaching, or collaborative study groups (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2007) so that students have opportunities to collect and analyse classroom data and engage in professional dialogue. Completing self-evaluation 'boxes' on lesson-plans is inadequate for this purpose. Put simply, students need to be *taught* how to reflect critically and this should become a key element of initial teacher education programmes. Part of the teaching might involve the joint development (student-teachers and teacher educators) of appropriate frameworks and a meta-language which is understood by everyone.

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