

RESEARCH TITLE

Reflection: Core Values and Barriers

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Abstract

Reflection has become a cornerstone in contemporary teacher education, influencing educators' practices and professional identities. It involves examining beliefs and actions related to teaching, with the primary aim of enhancing educational quality. However, implementing reflective practices involves complex challenges, from theory-practice alignment to addressing barriers that limit engagement. This study explores key aspects of reflection, its benefits, and challenges in teaching. Through an examination of reflection in ELT, we outline how reflection fosters professional growth and the obstacles that educators encounter.

Key Words: Reflection, Teacher Education, ELT, Professional Growth, Barriers

Research Contents

Introduction

In contemporary teacher education, reflection has emerged as a fundamental component of educators' identities and their professional practices. Essentially, reflection entails the examination of one's actions and beliefs regarding teaching. The primary objective of this reflective practice is to foster awareness and identification, thereby contributing to the enhancement of educational quality. While the concept of reflection may appear straightforward in theory, its practical implications are profound. Reflection serves three key purposes: first, to delineate the various forms of underpinning reflection that arise from differing definitions and theoretical contexts; second, to align the benefits that reflective practice offers for teacher education; and third, to address the disengaging constraints arising from the complexities inherent in the education of educators engaged in reflection.

Definitions of Reflection

The emphasis on reflection within English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly since the 1980s, has been a response to the recognition of the theory-practice gap identified by Stenhouse—a challenge that remains pertinent today, as teacher education is often perceived as inadequate in equipping preservice teachers with the essential practical skills for effective classroom instruction (Korthagen et al., 2001; Lee, 2005). The term "reflection" in the 20th century is rooted in Dewey's (1933) characterization, which describes reflection as the process of mentally engaging with a subject and organizing one's experiences (Calderhead, 1989:43). Calderhead (1989) posits that reflection necessitates both questioning and the pursuit of solutions to clarify one's understanding of teaching and learning.

Reflection can manifest in two forms: cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement before or after an event, and through the events themselves, which involve the process of conceptualizing and making sense of experiences (Brockbank & McGill, 2000). Two types of reflection are identified: reflection in action (occurring during an event) and reflection on action (taking place after reviewing the event) (Schön, 1983).

Integral to these processes are the self-questioning elements emphasized by Hayes (1997), wherein reflection involves an exploration of one's actions and experiences in search of solutions to enhance teaching competency. Cowan (2006) concurs, asserting that addressing questions pertinent to learning and development necessitates the pursuit of answers.

Korthagen (2001) characterizes this process as transformation, wherein reflection converts experiences into knowledge through a cyclical process of experience, analysis, and synthesis. Hatton and Smith (1995) further underscore the "fundamental elements" of reflective practice, which include identifying explicit challenges in coaching and balancing simpler components with one's own data and reflections against relevant evidence. However, it is crucial to note that proper execution of reflective practices may pose challenges for research benefits, as indicated by Hatton and He. Manen (1977, in Hatton & Smith, 1995) identifies three levels of reflection: technical reflection, practical thinking, and critical reflective processes, which vary in depth and complexity.

Although various scholars have articulated the concept of reflection in diverse manners, Roberts (1998) suggests that part of this complexity arises from differing theoretical foundations that shape the understanding of reflection. This tension underscores the notion that reflection is contextually situated; each theoretical framework tends to emphasize particular components, necessitating critical evaluation that is grounded in actual teaching contexts.

Benefits of Reflection

Reflective teaching is associated with numerous advantages. A significant benefit is the heightened awareness of teaching and learning processes, which provides educators with valuable feedback regarding their performance (Hattie, 2012). Reflective teaching broadens the scope of deliberation to encompass educational content and objectives, which are essential for effective problem-solving (Parker, 1997). Furthermore, teachers can engage in reflection on their practices while simultaneously monitoring this reflection, thereby enhancing their awareness over time.

As noted by Brockbank and McGill (1998), intentional reflection is crucial for the development of critical thinking related to pedagogical approaches. Throughout this process, educators become cognizant of their practices, identifying both strengths and weaknesses, all of which contribute to the cultivation of more effective teaching skills. The reflective practices outlined by Flowerdew et al. serve to clarify teachers' objectives, with the adoption of reflective methods leading to improved performance (Bullard, 1992).

According to Ghaye and Ghaye (1998), reflection enables educators to distinguish between potential opportunities and the points at which challenges may arise. Teachers can recognize their strengths while simultaneously identifying areas for improvement, all while continuing to assign tasks to students. Schön (1983) contends that reflection acts as a means of recalibration, allowing practitioners to reassess and, if necessary, modify their tacit understandings developed through repetitive practice.

Moreover, reflection fosters a sense of autonomy for educators. Self-evaluation encourages self-directed decision-making and promotes professional growth among teachers (Akbari, 2007). This autonomy is critical for nurturing reflective practitioners capable of adapting to diverse educational environments.

Challenges of Reflection

Despite its significant advantages, engaging in reflection is not always straightforward for educators. The integration of reflection into daily practice poses challenges, as reflection serves no purpose unless one comprehends the methodological validity of the processes involved and how context influences this practice (Slotnick, 2014). There is a risk of conflating reflections with mere recounting of events rather than engaging in genuine reflective practices.

A primary challenge is the lack of clarity surrounding what constitutes reflection, which can lead to misunderstandings among educators (Roberts, 1998). This ambiguity highlights the difficulty of developing a comprehensive appreciation of reflective practices, which can be notoriously elusive to define (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Consequently, many practitioners find it challenging to apply theoretical concepts in a concrete manner, particularly those who are less experienced with reflective practices.

Despite the recognized benefits, motivating educators to engage in reflection is fraught with barriers. Various factors may contribute to the reluctance of teachers to reflect, including a strong preference for familiar routines over uncharted possibilities, and a hesitance to discuss their limitations (Schön, 1987). The fear of appearing weak may deter mentors from engaging in dialogues, further inhibiting the emotional vulnerability required for reflection and exposing gaps in capabilities, which can lead to hesitance in seeking constructive feedback (Brookfield, 1995). Many educators may also hesitate to question their beliefs, fearing the implications of students' perceptions and fixed attitudes that resist change (Michael, 1991).

Lastly, making sound decisions regarding the models and tools used for reflection can be challenging. If peers share similar beliefs, it is unlikely that they will challenge one another (Brookfield, 1995). As such, it is advisable to select "true mirrors" to reflect upon, considering the implications for the present organization and the positive impacts therein.

Summary

Reflective discourse within teacher education is central to the development of practitioners. Although the benefits are evident, the complexities and challenges associated with reflection must not be overlooked. It is imperative that both administrators and educators collaborate in defining key frameworks that ensure reflections are meaningful, fostering an environment conducive to pedagogical research. Despite the challenges, reflection retains a significant role in contemporary educational reform, promoting ongoing learning and professional development in daily practice (Rothman et al., 2007).

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