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9.6. Encouraging pre-service teachers to reflect on their teaching during practicum

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Abstract

The importance of reflection in learning has been emphasized in the context of many professional education programs. Reflection may support the analysis of personal assumptions related to certain issues and the planning of future actions that can change and improve teaching. The present study examines the concerns of pre-service teachers' related to practicum and the form of critical reflection they develop. Data collection mainly involved the examination of reports written individually by pre-service teachers. Implications of the research findings to enhance reflective thinking in practicum courses are discussed.

Key-words: Reflection, practicum, initial teacher education, early years education

1. Introduction

During the past decades the importance of educating reflective practitioners is especially valued in teacher education programs. The concept of reflection, however, has a number of definitions and is updated by a wide range of theoretical and philosophical orientations (Lee, 2005; Nolan, 2008; Williams & Grudnoff, 2011). Reflective teacher education aims to enable teachers to "have a clear view of their own philosophy and be prompted to consider how their beliefs, experiences and knowledge have shaped the theories they apply to teaching and learning" (Nolan, 2008, pp. 31-32). Therefore, reflection seems essential for teachers in order to critically question both ends and means and understand the complex nature of everyday classroom situations and their practice.

Practicum constitutes an integral part of initial teacher education in many countries. The main objectives of practicum is to help pre-service teachers gain knowledge regarding children's learning and development, familiarize with the nature of curriculum and subject-based approaches, develop communication skills, design educational activities and implement teaching strategies, manage classroom behavior, time and materials, assess and reflect (Cohen, Manion, Morrison & Wyse, 2010; Perry, 2004). In addition, practicum can provide a context for reflection enabling pre-service teachers realize educational processes and use research skills in order to understand a wider range of factors that affect pedagogical context and educational practice. In this perspective, reflection can be considered necessary not only to help pre-service teachers realize the connection between theoretical frameworks, certain practices and class

results (in the light of experience in the field where theory is not just "applied" but is exploited for understanding the educational context) but also it may strengthen the examination of personal assumptions related to certain issues and the planning of future actions that will change and improve teaching (Kampeza, 2013; Karalis, Sotiropoulos & Kampeza, 2007; Raikou, 2014). Whether there is a problem that the pre-service teacher confronts and seeks for solutions or a classroom situation the pre-service teacher wishes to reconsider, it is important to follow a procedure of reflection.

2. Critical reflection and transformative learning

As it was mentioned previously, several proposals can be found in literature regarding the reflection process. In the present research, emphasis was placed on Mezirow's theoretical approach (1991), as we believe it is critical not only to describe situations but also to attempt to decipher specific choices and propose alternative solutions. According to his theory, in order to achieve this process it is necessary to proceed to a deeper level of the subject's assumptions.

Transformative learning refers to the transformation of a dysfunctional frame of reference in order to become reliable for adult life, offering more justified interpretations and giving the subject the possibility to gain awareness of assumptions and experiences. The whole process of changing the way of thinking is called *perspective transformation*.

One of the cornerstones of his theoretical approach is *critical reflection*. Critical reflection is the vehicle to perspective transformation. It is defined as the reevaluation of opinions and values based on which we understand reality and act (Brookfield, 2012; Mezirow, 1998). The concept of critical reflection is connected to the effort to retrieve causes of an event or the justification of an allegation. This process, as an educational experience, doesn't simply refer to adjusting or even exceeding existing knowledge, but also refers to exceeding fundamental assumptions of that knowledge. Thus, it is about changing the main perception of the frame of reference we have endorsed, as we developed as a person, changes that often influence our standards for action (Illeris, 2004).

Content reflection refers to thinking of the experience itself. This involves "reflection on what we perceive, think, feel, or act upon. Process reflection is an examination of how we perform these functions of perceiving, thinking, feeling, or acting and an assessment of our efficacy in performing them... Premise reflection involves our becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel, or act as we do and of the reasons for and consequences of our" thoughts, feelings or actions (Mezirow, 1991, pp.107-108). Premise reflection includes occasions when we reflect on deeper, socially constructed assumptions, beliefs and values. Therefore, the change of our way of thinking, meaning overall transformative learning, can only come as a result of reflection on basic suppositions; and that is what critical reflection is all about.

In the present study, we attempted to explore the effect of introducing reflection processes on the practicum framework of the students of the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education at the University of Patras. The Department offers a series of courses at the university and teaching experience in public kindergartens (2nd, 3rd, 4th year of studies). During practicum courses, the importance and usefulness of reflection are pointed out, while pre-service teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice using written reports and taking part in small-group discussions.

The research questions we posed were:

- What are the main issues that they reflect on during the last semester of their practicum?
- Do they develop critical reflection (based on Mezirow's theoretical approach)?

3. Methodological framework

The research presented here refers to the reports of forty students in their fourth year of studies that enrolled in the practicum program. Throughout the year, the students spent 18 days at the schools where they implemented daily schedules they had designed themselves or supported the kindergarten teacher's programming.

During the 7th semester the students filled out a reflection form after each school visit. The reflection was on the specific day of the visit, while at the end of the semester they reflected on the whole period. The questions were based on specific issues concerning teaching processes (implementation of the activities, time and materials), flexibility and addressing unexpected events, feedback, differentiation of instruction, interaction and communication with the children, cooperation with colleagues. These reports were more technical and closed based on given themes that functioned as "interpretive" lenses in order to help them make sense of their experience and analyze their teaching practice. After completing the form, a conversation was held: the students' answers were elaborated and opinions were exchanged and analyzed in order to reinforce the critical reflection process.

During the 8th semester students weren't given the reflection form. Instead, conversations and analysis took place systematically after visiting the kindergarten class, as happened during the previous semester. At the end of the 8th semester a reflection form was completed for the entire year. The questions were open-ended and students were encouraged to express their thoughts freely. We posed open-ended questions, such as:

- Why do you believe practicum is important?
- In your opinion, what do you feel you have accomplished during practicum?
- Where do you mainly attribute your effective actions and your ineffective ones concerning your teaching practice?
- Do you believe that the way you communicate with children has changed? In what way? What caused this change?
- Is there something that you have reconsidered and you may do differently?

The qualitative approach was chosen as the most appropriate for investigating issues that concerned us most. More specifically, qualitative content analysis was applied to examine the students' responses to the previous questions. Each student's answers from the reflection forms were analyzed both from the 7th and the 8th semester in order to have data at two levels: at a first level, we were interested in the answers the students gave to the questions posed. At a second level, we looked for elements of critical reflection in their answers in order to place the students in one of the three categories, depending on the degree of critical reflection according to Mezirow. This research presents the results of the data analysis of the students' answers during the last reflection.

4. Results

The results concern data analysis of the pre-service teachers' last reflection in order to demonstrate similarities and differences regarding issues that were elaborated throughout the year and detect elements of critical reflection.

Table 1

Coding Categories Developed from the Responses to the Question Concerning the Importance of Practicum

Categories	Responses
Connection of learning theory and pedagogy with experiential knowledge	36
Providing an opportunity for professional experience & understanding of the role of teacher	25
Revealing what really happens within the context of classrooms	17
Enabling collaboration with experienced teachers	15
Realization of the value of communication with young children	11
Learning about oneself as a teacher (capabilities, limits, mistakes)	9
Understanding the necessity to be flexible and implement different kinds of activities	8
Valuing the importance and usefulness of reflection	6
Understanding the importance of proper preparation and consistency	6
Understanding the importance of children's observation in order to address their needs/skills	5
Cooperating with fellow students	5
Broadening professional interests	2

The majority of the responses concentrate on the first two categories demonstrating that the reflection process that was applied throughout the year could possibly serve as a tool that enables pre-service teachers to think beyond a specific moment in class and prepare them for subsequent professional learning and development. Furthermore, the concentration of several answers on the "collaboration with experienced teachers" category may reveal that there is a need for guidance and, at the same time, a need for satisfaction of becoming members of a learning community. The importance of reflection in the practicum framework is demonstrated in the 8th category, while the other categories are connected to a great extent to issues elaborated by the students during the school year.

Table 2

Coding Categories Developed from the Responses to the Question Concerning What They Have Accomplished during Practicum

Categories	Responses
Overcoming stress and acquiring confidence	37
Understanding how to communicate more effective with children and observe them	23
Managing various circumstances/situations with flexibility	20
Acquiring professional experience	20
Realization of various aspects of teacher's role	18
Effective cooperation between colleagues	14
Ability to set objectives, design, organize and implement activities	13
Understanding the importance and usefulness of reflection	9
Knowing myself better	9
Meeting the needs, skills and interests of young children	8
Proper preparation and consistency	4
Making teaching meaningful and interesting for young children	2
Teaching new knowledge to children	1

Most answers correspond to the first category, demonstrating that practicum facilitates students to gain confidence at what they do. Therefore, it prepares students to submit questions concerning their choices and specific beliefs. The next two categories show that using the reflection process during practicum may have enhanced pre-service teachers' consideration of children's level of understanding. From the next

three categories it becomes clear that they now understand more dimensions of their role, while the 8th and 9th class show the recognition of the value of the reflection, which in the context of the practice, seems to lead to better self- understanding. From the next three categories it is evident that the students understand more dimensions of their role, while the 8th and 9th categories show recognition of the value of reflection that seems to lead to a higher level of self-understanding in the context of their practice.

Table 3
Coding Categories Developed from the Responses to the Question concerning Attributes of Effective Teaching

Categories	Responses
Proper preparation	25
Guidance and effective cooperation with the teacher of the class	14
Ability to be flexible in class	10
Effective cooperation with 2nd student in class	8
Observing how children think and react	7
Proper presentation of the topic and coherence of activities	7
Love and care for children	4
Theoretical framework from courses in university	3
Reflection	2
Children that were cooperating	2
Topic that was based on children's experiences	1
Patience	1

As it is demonstrated in Table 3, the majority of the pre-service teachers attribute their effective teaching to proper preparations that also integrate discussions during class. Flexibility in the classroom and working with the teacher and fellow students also play an important role. A clear reference to critical reflection is noted in two occasions; however, the category of observing children and the category of making use of the theoretical framework may be connected to aspects of reflection.

Table 4
Coding Categories Developed from the Responses to the Question concerning Attributes of Ineffective Teaching

Categories	Responses
Lack of experience and stress	27
Difficulty to deal with children's reactions	9
Topic and structure of schedule	6
Pressure (a lot of things to do during practicum)	5
Not having adequate time to get to know all the children	4
Lack of proper preparation	3
Setting unrealistic objectives	2
Having children with special educational needs	1
Financial reasons (cost of materials)	1
Children getting tired	1

Lack of experience and stress gather the majority of the responses. What seems to derive from the other categories of this table is that many answers are connected to their role and a shift to place responsibility on their behavior and choices.

Table 5

Coding Categories Developed from the Responses to the Question concerning Issues that They Have Reconsidered and May Do Differently

Categories	Responses
Focusing on children (listen to them, child-initiated activities)	19
The way of communication with children (understanding their thinking)	19
Flexibility (no "recipes", need to have alternative options)	9
Importance of reflection	7
Taking advantage of experience in class to be effective teacher	7
Proper preparation	5
Moral responsibility to children	3
Personal characteristics	3
Meaningful learning (motivation & connection to everyday experiences)	1
Children having fun	1
Time management	1

The categories concentrating the most answers relate to focusing on the children and ways of communication with them. Alternative solutions and the importance of reflection are also popular answers, while it is interesting that the categories of moral responsibility and personal elements seem to be connected to issues of principles and values.

The following table demonstrates the classification of the pre-service teachers according to Mezirow's forms of reflection. The first form of reflection relates to answers referring to situations and participants in the educational process (for example ill-behaved children, theme/activity type, etc.). There is no critical examination of their behavior.

For example, "Some children often interrupt with something irrelevant or bother the other children. As a result I can't continue at the momentum I had before the interruption and the children get distracted. Another problem was when two consecutive activities required the children to sit. For instance, when one activity was a discussion on a topic and the next one was reading a story, children got distracted during the second activity" (S9).

The second form responds to answers that describe the students' experience through their role (how they managed the situation, which actions worked and which did not and why, what they would do in a similar occasion, what they gained from this experience etc.).

For example, "Spending time with children surprised me when I saw how much they can think, say and do. Children have their own opinions and judgment… I also realized that proper behavior is required from them as much as myself in order to gradually build a relationship of trust, respect and love" (S18).

The third form corresponds to answers that are related to issues of pedagogical principles and changes of opinion.

For example, "I went through a wide range of emotions (e.g., joy, sorrow, excitement, frustration) and I evolved as a teacher. I defined my position and my role in the classroom and I learnt a lot about myself as a person, as an adult and as a new teacher... You can't have a "sterile" role when the children evolve constantly. This awareness may have changed the way I communicate with the children" (S10). "Self-criticism and reflection never end. I took some things for granted but nothing really is in the end. Every child needs time and at a different degree. You need to be there for all the children and for every one individually" (S38).

Table 6
Forms of Reflection (Mezirow)

Form	Responses
Content reflection (description of their experience without assessing their actions)	2
Process reflection (focus on their role concerning their experience)	25
Premise reflection (questioning the validity of beliefs, pedagogical principles)	13

5. Discussion

It is clear that a growth in pre-service teachers' thinking has taken place. Concerning our first research question almost all the reflection issues that were proposed appeared in last semester's report:

Communication and interaction with children

Flexibility and addressing unexpected events

Using observation in order to address children's needs/skills

Proper preparation (design, time, materials)

Cooperation with colleagues

Furthermore, issues that came up in last semester's report show that pre-service teachers were able to better cope with the complexity of teaching and their role:

Connection of theoretical perspectives with experience in class

Their professional role and the way they see themselves as teachers

Handling personal characteristics and feeling confident about their choices

Reflection is viewed as a key component of teaching practice

Concerning our second question, results show that the majority of pre-service students are classified in the category of "process reflection" that is more instrumental and focuses on solving specific problems. However, 13 of the participants were in the "premise reflection" category; this is particularly encouraging, since it is the starting point for deeper understanding and change.

The students that represent the third category show increased responsibility and sense of duty. They show exceptional sensitivity and respect towards the children's perception of the world. More specifically we noted that:

They pose questions of ethics and pedagogical principles (liability issues of their role, necessity to respect the needs of children, etc.).

They don't limit themselves to the learning object but also make generalizations and try to meet children's wider needs. They try to directly connect everything the children learn to their lives and approach knowledge holistically.

They make sure that what they do is essential for the children and they don't simply rely on the implementation of a well-designed program.

They believe it is very important that the learners know not only *what* they are learning but *why* they are learning it (as they put it "to gain conscious experiences"). This means that they try to help children develop critical thinking.

Furthermore, the students noted changes in the way they perceive themselves: changes in their behavior, their perceptions about educational practices and pedagogical principles, as well as emotional changes, differences that are now conscious. These changes are identified both at a personal level as individuals and at a professional level regarding their role as educators.

Concerning the support of reflection in the context of their practice, we suggest the implementation of more processes that can facilitate reflection, such as journal writing, interviews, and dialogue concerning critical events in order to create various opportunities for reflection. Developing a set of focused questions in each case may enable pre-service teachers to move beyond the general description of the activities

(what went well and what did not) and toward critical reflection placing each situation in a broader context that requires deeper explanations and proposals.

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