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Enhancing Student-teachers' Learning and Teaching through Guided Reflection

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Abstract

The project aimed at developing the ability of student-teachers of the new full-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education Course to better reflect on their teaching and prepare them for assuming their roles as teachers. Students participated in a series of group meetings in which they shared their feelings, thoughts and emerging concerns from their initial involvement in teaching. The meetings were held during the six-week practical component of the Course and continued during the first few months of their teaching in schools. The sessions were observed and recorded using a participant observation technique. In between meetings, the students were visited in their schools and interviewed to solicit their main concerns and thoughts. Main themes raised by the students served as a basis for their reflection in the meetings. Follow-up interviews highlighted the contribution of the sessions to students' ability to reflect and to learn through guided reflection by the investigators. Using the above method enabled student-teachers to obtain direct feedback about their reflection process and help them to assume a more active role in evaluating their own teaching practice.

Key words

Teacher development, guided reflection, student-teachers' learning

Introduction

One of the suggested ways to develop the reflective skills of teachers is to involve them directly in enquiry activities into their own teaching, and monitor their learning through reflection sessions (Henderson, 2001; Pollard, 2002; Moseley & Ramsey, 2008; Postholm, 2008; Shussler et al., 2008). The development of teachers' ability to reflect on their own teaching is one of the major aims of the Postgraduate Diploma of Education Course offered in the Department of Education Studies.

Involvement of students in enquiry activities has been implemented in an elective entitled *Classroom Research*, which was taught by the principal investigator

of the project. A list of 120 concerns was raised by students as part of their initial reflection exercise. These concerns were related to personal and professional issues which teachers have to face in practice. While students were engaged in simulated enquiry activities in the class, they were not given the opportunity to undertake these activities in their practice. It was hoped that during the component entitled *Supervised Teaching Practice* (STP), students would be generating questions and subject their everyday professional experience to ongoing critical reflection, action and observation, a process which is of high value for teachers since it facilitates their understanding of their teaching practice, helps them to gain a better understanding of their role and improves their teaching and their students' learning. While reflection is an essential process for student-teachers, it is best undertaken in a collaborative manner where participants share their experience and thoughts in a dialogical way. We can then ensure that "the audience serves to validate, extend, modify, support, or reject what we think through by interacting with us and providing feedback that can happen only in a collaborative process" (McAllister & Neubert, 1998, p.6) Furthermore, collective thinking on experiences and ways to improve practices is a significant process for teachers (Kwo, 1998). To best facilitate such a process, the use of guided reflection is highly recommended for pre-service students and beginners-teachers (Wodlinger, 1990; Baker & Shahid, 2003; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007; Nolan, 2008).

This includes teacher's modelling and questioning in the classroom setting, with models of reality being analysed before and during the field opportunities (McAllister & Neubert, 1998).

Aims and Objectives

The present project aimed at enhancing the reflection skills of student-teachers in their initial practice experience as teachers. The objectives of the project were as follows:

1. to develop in student-teachers the practical knowledge of reflection;
2. to provide a platform and forum for collaborative reflection on their initial teaching experience;
3. to facilitate their application of reflection in their initial teaching experience; and
4. to provide support for their personal and professional growth into the teaching profession.

Methodology

The project was implemented with students who attended the course *Classroom Research* during their initial reflection stages in class. Consent was sought from students and all of them (total=16) agreed to participate. The methodology employed in the project comprised: four guided reflection sessions undertaken in a group setting and two individual interviews with students. The two interviews were conducted with the students to solicit their generated concerns and questions about their teaching and

learning. The first interview was held during students' six-week *Supervised Teaching Practice* (STP) period while they were still students of the PgD in Ed Course. The second interview was held during their actual teaching in schools after they had completed the Course. Data solicited through the interviews were analysed using the NU•DIST Qualitative Package to arrive at the main themes of student-teachers' general concerns and specific questions.

Results/Findings

Sharing Sessions

During the first two sessions, students reflected their concerns about finding employment in teaching. Being fresh graduates, only a few of them had been invited for interviews or been offered jobs. With the guidance of the project investigators, those who had attended job interviews shared their experience of the interview process and content.

This was followed by an interactive discussion on interviewing techniques and the best ways to prepare for interviews. Since the participants were from different disciplines, the sharing was useful in terms of widening their practical knowledge and understanding about other subjects beyond their own. Furthermore, they had a better understanding of the local job market in the teaching profession, for example, the small number of teaching positions for History.

The process undertaken during these sessions illustrated the usefulness of the guided reflection employed by the project investigators. Below are some examples of student-teachers' accounts:

One student-teacher in the English major said:

> The preparation [for the job interview] is important. I did a lot of predictions and prepared standard [questions and] answers. I also collected past materials and put them into a file in order to show the principal.

Another student referred to the importance of raising the level of confidence during the interviews. She said:

> The principal showed me some [school] situations which involved discipline problems and asked me to suggest some coping strategies. I answered him confidently even though I was not sure whether my suggestions were good enough. I would suggest that all of you show your confidence when you respond to the interviewer.

The following two sharing sessions took place after the participants had obtained a teaching position in schools. The focus of the sharing sessions shifted from issues related to job hunting to feelings and thoughts related to job competencies and satisfaction. While some participants indicated that they obtained an acceptable position, others showed lower satisfaction which they attributed to a mismatch between their expertise and their

present job. In general they also felt their qualification was underestimated. Some examples are as follows:

One History major student said:

Right now I am teaching in a primary school... I do not enjoy teaching there. My students are very young and it is so time-consuming to handle classroom administrative tasks, for example, collecting money [fees] and homework.

Another student mentioned:

I am a teaching assistant and I am not given the chance to teach in class. In fact, I am only acting as a tutor and students ask me questions only during recess or lunch time.

While reflecting on their positions as teachers, the participants raised several issues related to their current position and its impact on their lives. The common concerns of the participants included aspects of socialisation into the new school and being overworked, which apparently affected their quality of life. Some student accounts were as follows:

The problem is that my school has a lot of hidden agenda; everyone just goes on and you are behind them. You do not know how to operate. For example, teachers were supposed to go to the playground to lead the students to their classrooms. However, no one told me about that, so I went to the class [directly]. [To my surprise,] I saw nobody [in the classroom]. After a while, I discovered my

students lining up in the playground and immediately I rushed to them.

I feel so tired after work that I go straight home for rest. I cannot think about anything else but watch TV. During weekends, I spend much more time sleeping at home.

Interviews

Two interviews were held with the student-teachers. The first was conducted during their participation in the *Supervised Teaching Practice* (STP) as part of the PgD in Ed Course. The second was held after their graduation from the Course and during their first year of teaching.

The main themes raised during the first interview related mainly to the STP. Student-teachers described the main duties they understood as well as the things they learned and their related feelings and concerns.

Student-teachers' duties were related to their subject teaching and their involvement in extra-curricular activities. During their STP they learned communication skills, new teaching methods, issues related to time and classroom management, as well as to school structure and administration. The student-teachers felt fairly happy about the STP asserting that this mechanism was practical and helpful. Some students mentioned that they were being a bit overloaded during this practicum. Students were mainly concerned with classroom discipline. A few of them mentioned the

problem of having inadequate school resources. Following are some typical examples of these students' accounts:

> …In fact, I have been struggling for the direction of classroom management. Some teachers set many rules at the beginning of the lesson. Students are quiet during the lesson, but the relationship between the teacher and the students is poor and students dislike the lesson too. I find that if I set fewer rules, the learning atmosphere of the class is better and students can enjoy the learning process [more]. Even the students who dislike studying will also participate in the lesson. Therefore, I am still groping for the best controlling level of classroom management.

> …I teach an elite class and I need to follow two of their examinations. I'm nervous, as I'm loaded with many responsibilities and much pressure. I looked for the results in the past, fearing that their results would step backwards. [Luckily] the results which have just been announced showed that they [my students] have made a little progress.

Student-teachers also suggested that the period for STP could be extended so that they can have more practical experience. At the same time they suggested shortening the *School Experience* (SE) period. It seems that students were really keen to embark on the teaching duties earlier in the Course.

The second interview shed more light on student-teachers' initial teaching experience after graduation from the Course. The main themes arising from their accounts included their current responsibilities, what they have learned from their teaching experience and their feelings, thoughts, expectations and concerns about that. Their responsibilities were mainly serving as class teachers and subject teachers and taking part in extra-curricular activities. During their initial teaching experience, they acquired communication skills with their students and colleagues. They understood better the role of a teacher in teaching and in class management. They further experienced the importance of stress management and competence of coping with problems independently. Below are some student-accounts:

> Other than learning how to be a teacher, I also learn how to tackle my working pressure, and how to handle problems in the changing teaching environment. I know how to rank the priority of work. I can develop a good relationship with my students. I believe that my pressure could be reduced if I could maintain good relations with students.

> I learnt how to keep a good relationship with colleagues and how to communicate with parents. I need to contact parents of those students with weaker academic results in the English subject, talk with them regarding the causes of students' poor results and their difficulties in learning English. I [gradually] learnt the

techniques in handling parents. It is very important for me to communicate with colleagues.

When talking about their feelings, student-teachers referred to the relationship with their colleagues as well as their work nature:

My colleagues are very nice and friendly. Teachers always group together to have gathering every week, such as playing football. Female teachers will watch our match together. Teachers will also travel together and have dinner and lunch together. We all help each other in teaching and share our teaching material and exam papers. We work together like friends.

I feel very happy because I meet some helpful and nice colleagues in this school. I am a Christian. I can share my feeling and experience with others in the praying meeting. We always help each other. Although there are not many Christian teachers in our school, the atmosphere is very good and harmonious. There are only 10 Christian teachers in our school.

Their main concerns were in their relationship with their students and at times there were some conflicts among their colleagues. They also shared their difficulties in teaching their subjects and issues related to pressure and workload at school. When facing such problems, the student-teachers would either solve the problems by themselves or consult colleagues and friends. Ideally, student-teachers expected to solicit support from their school in terms of getting some background information, useful teaching materials, proactive assistance from their colleagues, adequate mentoring support and less pressure from school. In reality, the support they obtained from their school was along their expectations.

The relationship among teachers is quite complicated. Teachers always struggle with each other for promotion chances. For example, some teachers will send e-mail to tell the principal about the personal life of other teachers and about some teachers who have lost their exam papers and other belongings in the staff room, etc.

It is difficult for me to handle students with emotional problems. Some students (3-4 out of 37 students each class) have such problems. These students cannot sit down [properly] and pay attention in class. They cannot refrain from moving their bodies. Teachers always ignored these students' actions and behaviour deliberately. [I think] schools pay less attention to or deliberately ignore some students with emotional or intelligence problems. In fact, they [these students] should be sent to special education schools. However, the parents refused to do that. As a new teacher, I can do nothing to solve this problem, as it's the culture of the school. Regarding the class teaching, most of the students attend private tuition after school. As a result, they do not pay attention in class.

When comparing their current teaching to their STP experience, student-teachers indicated some similarities and differences, with the latter related to the amount of their responsibility and stress.

> It's almost the same. Unlike other student- teachers, I was a teacher in this school before. Also, I was doing STP in this school. I know the [school] culture and students' preferences for this school and I know how to draw their attention in class. One different thing is that the responsibility of current teaching is much heavier than that of STP as I need to do follow up actions concerning students' homework and examination result.

> We had a lot of time for lesson preparation in STP. For example, I could spend 3 hours for one lesson preparation. However, I cannot do that while teaching now. I had no other duties in STP whereas currently I have a lot of duties. As a class teacher, I face some technical problems that I have never encountered in PgD in Ed course. For example, I could not enroll in the PgD in Ed subject "School Guidance". Anyway, I don't know whether the guidance subject can help us or not. Actually, I have no working experience as a class teacher. I believe that September is the most important month for Form 1 new students to adapt to the new school life. However, I did not provide any [special] guidance for them.

> My expectation of STP was less than that of the current teaching. I have lighter responsibilities in STP. As for teaching, I see no big difference during the STP and my current teaching.

> There is a great difference between my current school teaching and STP. I think that the period for STP was rather short. I could not learn much from STP and could not establish a student-teacher relation within the two-month period. Besides, students always thought that I [student-teacher] was a learner and did not treat me as a teacher. As compared to my current school teaching, I learn more communication skills and teaching techniques.

> There is a great difference between my current school teaching and the STP. I was not a class teacher during the STP while I am a class teacher in my school now. Actually, I devote much time in performing a class teacher's role rather than in preparing my teaching content. During the STP, I could attend more to the teaching content and teaching techniques such as using IT presentation. However, I can hardly devote much time to preparing for my routine teaching. I really do not have time to do so. As a class teacher, I need to handle students' behavioural and emotional problems. To sum up, I have more responsibilities and pressure during my current school teaching as compared with the STP.

Discussion

Student-teachers' feedback indicated that the present project has been highly

relevant to their career as teachers. The project has provided a platform for them to reflect in a collaborative manner on their teaching experience in their last stage of studying and their initial stage of their teaching career. Student-teachers were able to share their concerns and get support for their personal and professional growth. They indicated the usefulness of sharing their experiences with their fellow-students and highly appreciated the advice of their project investigators with the sharing sessions being undertaken in a form of guided reflection.

The information solicited through the interviews which were conducted with student-teachers at several milestones in their teaching experience shed light on their concerns, feelings and thoughts. It was interesting to find out the common concerns which set the foundation for the sharing sessions. What made the sharing sessions so unique was the informal setting, that is, being relaxed and yet creating an atmosphere conducive to learning. The sharing sessions were found to be the most appropriate forums for student-teachers in their final stage of learning as well as when they embark on their role as initial teachers. While being students of the PgD in Ed Course, they reflected on their learning process, and when being initial teachers, they reflected on both their learning and teaching experiences. The sharing session can be viewed as the intersection between two important stages in their development and thus supports a smooth shift from being learners to practitioners.

With the investigators escorting the participants throughout these stages of development and providing guided reflection on themes raised by them, the participants gain a holistic understanding of their role as teachers and can better reflect on both their teaching and learning processes. This reflection can enhance their acquisition and implementation of coping strategies necessary for best undertaking the role of a teacher.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

Student-teachers' feedback on the contribution of the project to their professional development as teachers has indicated clearly how it has enhanced their teaching and learning. They especially indicated the usefulness of the sharing sessions which were the core of the project. Based on the main themes which emerged out of the individual interviews, the sessions provided an excellent platform for student-teachers to share the common issues they tackled during the initial phases of their career as teachers. Both the interviews and the sharing sessions were very helpful in facilitating student-teachers' reflection on their experience both as students and initial teachers. They kept emphasizing the usefulness and contribution of the sessions in enabling them to talk about their difficulties, making them aware of their peers' problems and facilitating them to obtain support as well as advice from the lecturers:

During the sharing session, we discussed

with each other regarding our teaching experience and the interview process for teachers' recruitment. I think that the sharing session is valuable. Sharing sessions should be relaxing in nature so that we can bring up questions and share our experience with each other. It is good that our lecturers/ advisors can give us some advice and comments.

It is good that the sharing sessions address our sharing of working experiences, for example, ways of handling disciplinary problems, teaching skills and job vacancies in the market, etc.

Some students came up with some suggestions for the nature of the sharing sessions, stating that they could be combined with training sessions on updated issues. They also suggested holding the sharing sessions on holidays when more teachers are free, and this will enable everyone to attend.

There should be no limitation in the topics and scope of sharing. I expect that we can share our experience in teaching and problem-solving with one another. We can also talk about our attitudes towards teaching and mutually encourage ourselves when we are frustrated with our routine teaching. It [The sharing session] should be in a group format.

It can be done during a casual dinner. We can just share our teaching and experience with one another.

I do not have much expectation of the sharing sessions. I [simply] expect it to be a gathering session or a supporting team for classmates to share their experience with others in tackling different teaching problems in school. As a result, we can support one another.

It is good that the sharing sessions facilitate our sharing of working experiences, for example, our ways of handling disciplinary problems, our teaching skills and updated information about job vacancies in the market, etc.

Teachers will not come as they have to attend meetings in schools, and as new teachers, they are particularly busy with their work. They will not bother to come all the way from the New Territories to [the meeting venue in] Kowloon. The most obvious constraint is time. It will be better to have a workshop first and a dinner next…

Maybe you can offer a training session prior to the sharing sessions. We can hold the sharing sessions informally over dinner. For me, it will also be better if we hold the sessions over the holidays…

Even though the majority of the students indicated the importance of holding the sessions in an informal setting, one student suggested having it as a formal meeting which combines individual consultation with a group sharing:

It should be a formal session rather than

a gathering session. It will be better if the lecturer and professor meet individual student periodically first, and then conduct a group session after individual consultation. However, the sharing sessions actually provide us chances to understand the situation of our classmates and other schools. Therefore, spending half an hour on individual consultation will be more useful for us in tackling our individual problems.

Based on the success of the project in achieving its objectives, it is recommended to continue introducing similar activities which could facilitate student-teachers' reflection. Since the use of informal settings is of great significance to the success of the collaborative sharing sessions, it would be useful to combine the sessions with some activities which are more explicit in nature.

Limitations/Difficulties

There were two main constraints which affected the smooth running of the project. These included the change of Project Assistant and the student-teachers' heavy workload at schools. The first constraint led to the need for extending the project duration. The second constraint caused a reduction in the number of interviews conducted with students as well as in the number of sharing sessions. Even though these constraints affected the smooth running of the project, the investigators managed to achieve the stated objectives. Students were interviewed before and after embarking on their jobs as teachers, which provided an in-depth picture about

their feelings, thought and concerns. The main themes which came up during the interviews served as the foundation for the sharing sessions. In addition, the investigators made use of the electronic mail to communicate with the student-teachers when it was difficult to arrange a sharing session due to their heavy workload.

Conclusion

Results of the project indicated the importance of involving student-teachers in activities which would facilitate their reflection in their last stage of study and their initial stage of teaching. The sharing sessions were significant in that they served as the platform for students to share their experiences with one another and learn different ways to cope with their concerns. Interviews held with students during the above two stages in their career highlighted the main themes which served as the foundation for guided reflection by the investigators during the sessions. On the whole, the project was successful in achieving its objectives of developing student-teachers' practical knowledge of reflection, providing them the forum for collaborative reflection, facilitating their reflection in their teaching experiences and providing them with the adequate support for their personal and professional growth. The use of guided reflection in a group setting and with the involvement and support of the lecturers, was found to be an effective way for enhancing student-teachers' personal and professional development. Our project

has indicated the contribution of guided reflection to support student teachers at the last stage of their study as well as then they change to be beginning teachers. Previous examinations of guided reflection mechanisms among pre-service teachers have indicated the contribution of self-directed (Chitpin, Simon & Galipeau, 2008), and journal writing approaches (Wodlinger, 1990; Baker & Shaid, 2003). Our project highlighted the contribution of the sharing sessions mechanism. Based on the results of the project it is recommended to include the use of this mechanism in our pre-service teacher education programmes and continue it while the students embark on their job as teachers.

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