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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a study which aimed to explore the use of reflective practices to develop professionalism among pre-service teachers at the National University of Lesotho. The study sought to contribute to the local and international debate on best practice in encouraging and scaffolding constructivism through reflective practice among teachers. Forty final year pre-service teachers participated in the study and were interviewed individually and in groups. They shared their conceptions and views about how they plan to engender professional growth in their own teaching. By engaging in this exercise, this group of future teachers was empowered to develop into reflective professionals. The findings were discussed against the Centric Reflection Model which posits the different stages and dimensions of the reflective exercise. The author argues that reinforcing reflective dispositions could promote professional growth, and decrease misconduct and lack of professionalism associated with some teachers in Lesotho.

Keywords: constructivism; Centric Reflection Model; reflective practices; professionalism; teacher education; teacher development

Introduction and Background

In its quest to improve the quality of education, the government of Lesotho recognises that it is imperative to consider both quality and quantity as significant factors in the teacher output. It realises that without appropriately qualified and skilled teachers, most of its strategic goals would not be achievable (MoET 2005). Despite its intent to improve teaching, there is a public dissatisfaction in Lesotho with regard to the quality

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of teacher output. The different stakeholders are mostly concerned about lack of ethics and professionalism among some of the teacher graduates.

In contrast to the stipulations made in the *Teaching Service Regulations* (MoET 2002) and the *Code of Good Practice* (MoET 2011) some teachers still contravene the rules and regulations and perpetually get involved in unprofessional activities such as absenteeism, lateness, laziness and drunkenness. Urwick, Mapuru and Nkhoboti (2009) attribute such behaviour to lack of professional commitment among such teachers. This view is reiterated by Lesaoana (2011, 8) who clarifies that “while there are teachers who fully abide by the rules and regulations of the teaching profession, there are also those who lack the responsibility to perform their duties effectively and efficiently”. This lack of professionalism impacts negatively on the school climate and permeates teaching and learning adversely. It is a cause for concern for all stakeholders, especially the teacher training institutions (TTIs). This is why there is a general outcry that something has to be done to enhance the caliber of the teacher graduates.

As one of the TTIs, the National University of Lesotho (NUL), through the Faculty of Education, seeks to augment its programmes with the ultimate goal of producing competent teachers who exude professionalism and are committed to their career (NUL 2013). However, there are limited research findings to inform strategies to be put in place for the achievement of this goal; that is, there has not been any research conducted to assess the quality of the teacher trainees at NUL. In this regard, I contend that professionalism in the teaching career can be achieved by inculcating reflective dispositions among teacher trainees. Reflective practice specifically helps prospective teachers to develop the ability to examine their own concepts, theories and beliefs about teaching and the subject matter. Moreover, it prevents them from “settling for existing traditional educational patterns and it emancipates them from following in the routine behaviour of others” (Derwent 2015, 260). It can be emphasised that reflective practice plays a vital role in developing professionalism among teachers (Farrell 2014). Hence, it has to be built-into all levels of teacher education.

The current study sought to engage some of the final year Bachelor of Education (BEd) students in a reflective practice and to explore their perceptions and theoretical understanding of how they intend to develop professionalism and continuously improve their own teaching once they are in the schools. The study was framed within the constructivist paradigm whose central notion is that the learners play an active role in “constructing” their own meaning. Thus, knowledge is not seen as fixed and existing independently outside of the learner. Rather, it is perceived as a process of accommodation or adaptation of new experiences or ideas (Biggs and Tang 2011; Le Cornu and Peters 2005). This is why I found it necessary to allow the students who participated in the study to reflect on and construct their own meaning regarding professional matters.

As a professional development strategy, reflective practice has its roots in the constructivist paradigm. It places learning on a constructivist-oriented basis (Derwent

2015). Reflective practice was originally described by Dewey (1933) and later developed by Schon (1987). In this regard, constructivism and reflective practice are linked by the recognition that they share basic assumptions about knowledge and learning. Central to both is the notion that ideas and actions are integral, interdependent, and essential aspects of the learning process. According to Dervent (2015), the application of these principles in the professional development setting reduces the boundaries between theory and practice.

The Importance of Reflective Practice in Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning

Reflective thinking can be defined as “an active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (Ditchburn 2015, 94). Reflection is viewed as the foundation for developing the highest professional competence in teaching. It allows teachers to become empowered decision makers. Creating opportunities for pre-service teachers to critically reflect on and theorise about their practice is frequently regarded as an essential component of professional experience (Rodman 2010; Sempowicz and Hudson 2012). The above view is further underscored by Parkison (2009, 789) who asserts that “empowering future teachers as reflective professionals requires teacher education programmes to structure learning experiences that model reflective practice”. Rodman (2010, 20) concurs that “the repeated use of reflection throughout their teacher preparation experience can be useful in encouraging growth and improving pedagogical knowledge, teaching performance and professional development among pre-service teachers”.

Based on this exposition, it can be noted that it is characteristic of effective teachers to engage in transformative reflective practices (Biggs and Tang 2011; Green 2006). Such teachers are able to critically assess their actions to see whether they are effective or not. Hence, a reflective teacher is more likely to advance professional development as far as teaching and learning are concerned. Moreover, a reflective teacher is likely to improve his or her practice as well as add value to the teaching environment (Biggs and Tang 2011; Green 2006). This is in line with the constructivist view which contends that “knowledge is always context dependent and learning should occur in appropriate contexts” (Vojtko and Heskova 2010, 3). Thus, the different variables in teaching and learning context should be considered for their bearing on the quality of teaching and learning. Such variables include the learners themselves, the educator, the learning outcomes, the learning content as well as the teaching and assessment methods (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven and Dochy 2010; Biggs and Tang 2011).

With the foregoing factors in view, the focus is on the educator as one of the most critical variables in quality learning. This position is supported by Tuli and Tynjala (2015) who note that teachers are the most important factor in determining student achievement and

learning, as such, the continual renewing and deepening of teachers' knowledge and skill is imperative. In this regard, it can be acknowledged that "one of the qualities of good teachers is their ability to reflect on their practices" (Biggs and Tang 2011, 45).

My contention is that through teachers' reflections of their own teaching, they become more skilled and capable practitioners who are able to define their role in the context of educational goals. Therefore, it is crucial for beginning teachers to be equipped with reflective skills during their initial teacher training and that this should form part of their continuous professional development. This view is supported by Walkington (2005) and Rodman (2010) who point out that reflecting on their own perceptions, beliefs, experiences and practices is a core activity for all pre-service and in-service teachers.

Dimensions and Stages of the Reflective Process

As a learning strategy for professionals, the primary agenda of the reflective practice model is to change in the dimensions of professional practice (Osterman 1998). Such dimensions are comprehensively described by Green's (2006, 3–5) Centric Reflection Model which posits that the educator has to consider different dimensions (angles) and stages (moments) in order to make his or her reflective activities more meaningful. According to this model, teaching has to be evaluated from three different dimensions which are defined by Green (2006) as follows:

1. An egocentric view is a dimension which involves techniques, such as video recording and keeping a reflective journal to record thoughts and events surrounding a teacher's own teaching, which are used to conduct self-evaluation. In addition, guiding questions on how the lesson went and why it went that way can be asked in the process of self-evaluation.
2. An allocentric view represents the consideration of learners' views as part of the teacher's reflective practice.
3. A macrocentric view involves incorporating views of the mentors or peers in maintaining professional standards.

In further defining the nature of the reflective process, the Centric Reflection Model posits that there are three major moments of reflective practice: the first moment, which happens during an event such as classroom teaching, is called reflection-in-action; the second moment is thinking about the event after it has happened and is called reflection-on-action; and the third moment occurs when teachers think about future actions and is called reflection-for-action.

These stages of the reflective practice are defined by scholars such as Bodman (2010); Farrell (2014) and Green (2006) as follows:

1. Reflection-in-action makes teachers aware of what is actually happening in the present, before forgetting the details. This type of reflection allows teachers to take action during a lesson rather than to wait until later. Experienced teachers are more likely to master this but novice teachers may have a problem with reflection-in-action because they have not yet built up advanced schema of teaching routines. Some questions involved when reflecting-in-action include: Are my instructions clear and unambiguous? Are the activities going as planned? Are the activities too easy or too difficult for the students? What can I do to supplement the initial plan? Am I adequately stimulating the students? Do I need to increase student involvement or are some students over involved in the lesson? How many and what kind of questions am I asking? Do I need more probing techniques? Do I wait long enough after asking a question?
2. Reflection-on-action involves thinking back and reflecting after class in order to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson with a view to informing the direction of the subsequent lessons. Reflection-on-action focuses on the cognitive processes of teaching that depends on retrospection for analysis. Some questions which form part of reflecting-on-action include: Did the lesson go according to the plan. If not, what went wrong? What did the students learn and what evidence is there that they did learn? Do I need to re-teach any part of the lesson? Will I teach this lesson differently next time?
3. Reflection-for-action is proactive in nature. Teachers can prepare for the future by using knowledge from the present. Some questions that can be asked when reflecting-for-action are: What do I want my students to learn? How well do I understand the subject matter that I am going to teach? How will I organise my lesson(s)? What activities will I include? How will I check for student understanding? What cognitive levels do I intend to engage? How will I continue to improve myself?

Research Design and Methodology

The current study was qualitative in nature. A descriptive research design (Merriam 2009) was adopted to explore the meanings which prospective teachers ascribe to reflective practices. According to Merriam (2009, 15), “qualitative research can be used to make meaning of a specific phenomenon”. Descriptive designs also seek to understand the meanings or definitions that the participants have constructed. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) add that the process through which meaning is attributed to a phenomenon can also be reflexive in nature, thereby compelling participants to reflectively interrogate and redefine their own perceptions about a particular phenomenon. Thus, by virtue of being invited to take part in the research project, the participants were given an opportunity to engage in reflective practice in which they

would have otherwise not engaged. Thus, they had to redefine what reflective practice means to them in the context of their career.

Semi-structured and group interviews were used for data collection. These methods are usually used together in qualitative research to triangulate and enhance the richness of the findings. Semi-structured interviews, on the one hand, were used with the assumption that the participants' perspectives are meaningful and knowable (Greeff 2011; Nieuwenhuis 2007). This style of interviewing allowed for the collection of in-depth data about the perspectives and perceptions of prospective teachers regarding how they would implement reflective practices in their own teaching. Moreover, in qualitative data collection, some unanticipated probing was needed for clarification; semi-structured interviews permitted the researcher to do that.

On the other hand, group interviews are based on the assumption that group interaction will produce a wide range of responses while at the same time activating forgotten details regarding the shared experience (Nieuwenhuis 2007). This type of interviewing is useful where a group of participants have had the same exposure or have gone through a similar experience. It is important that everyone concerned is aware of the perspectives of others in the group (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). Since the present study focused on student teachers, this type of interviewing was employed with a view to supplementing individual interviews. It allowed the students to freely give their views in a less intimidating platform which is the company of their peers.

Selection of Participants and Ethical Considerations

In qualitative studies, the participants are purposively selected because they satisfy a specific criterion which the researcher has in mind (Maree and Pietersen 2007; Merriam 2009). The population for the study consisted of 270 final year students in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) – Secondary. This programme focuses on training teachers for secondary and high school levels. In this programme, students are taught various pedagogical courses, such as Clinical Supervision, in which topic/s on reflective practice forms part of the curriculum. Hence, the completing group was considered to have richer theoretical knowledge about this topic as opposed to their junior counterparts. This reflective exercise was meant to follow up on the theoretical knowledge they gained in the programme while at the same time exploring their readiness to go out and start their teaching career. The participants were asked to volunteer to be individually interviewed and the number was not pre-determined. Twelve students volunteered to be individually interviewed using semi-structured interviews, and 28 students were interviewed in four groups of seven members. Ultimately, a total of 40 students were interviewed. The reason for following up semi-structured interviews with focus group interviews was to supplement the data collected from individual interviews and to ensure crystallisation

of the methods. My belief was that the participants would feel more relaxed and free to voice their perspectives in the company of their classmates.

Ethical issues were observed in that permission was sought from the relevant structures of NUL, and informed consent was sought from the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). No one was coerced into participating and it was made clear to the participants that they were free to opt out at any point if they so wished. Confidentiality and anonymity were observed by ensuring that none of the presented data or findings could be linked to any of the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). The participants were allocated codes to disguise their identity. For instance, the 12 individual interview participants were labelled as II (Individual Interviews) A to L; whereas the focus group participants were labelled based on their respective groups as FG (Focus Group) 1-A to G; FG2-A to G, FG3-A to G or FG4-A to G. All audio tapes and their transcriptions were safely kept and will be destroyed after five years (Reid 2009; Whiting and Vickers 2010). Furthermore, the principles of beneficence applied in the research in that the participants were exposed to a reflective activity that empowered and helped them to gain some level of self-awareness and hopefully they will put these insights to use when they become practising teachers (Strydom 2011).

Findings

The participants were asked to reflect on how they would continually improve their teaching. Different techniques emerged from the data which were analysed using inductive codes that were derived from the data itself (Fouche and Delport 2011; Merriam 2009). The findings are presented in the following four categories: (1) various teaching techniques; (2) self-evaluation; (3) mentoring and peer supervision; and (4) further training and research.

Various Teaching Techniques

With regard to improving teaching and enhancing professionalism, the participants made reference to the use of various techniques. The following were the participants' responses in their own words:

I am planning to be an effective teacher who masters the subject matter and gives feedback immediately after assessment. (Participant II-B)

I intend to do my lesson plans well in time, use a variation of teaching methods in class and make use of different media in my lessons. (Participant II-C)

I will allow learners' full participation to break the monotonous lessons and encourage learners to be actively involved. (Participant FG1-B)

On the whole, the participants expressed that they will engage in thorough lesson planning and use various innovative teaching techniques and teaching aids. They also highlighted that they will be creative and integrate the use of media to make their lessons interesting. They also recognised the importance of using practical or true life examples, giving immediate feedback and ensuring the learners' full engagement by fostering collaborative activities among them.

Self- and Student-Evaluation

The study showed that the participants realise the importance of evaluating their teaching through self-evaluation and student-evaluation. They seemed to think that these would enhance their professional growth. For instance, these are the issues which were highlighted by some of them:

Reflecting on my teaching will help me to improve students' educational experience and identify areas for professional development. I intend to keep a reflective journal in which I record my thoughts after the teaching events. (Participant II-B)

Video-recording my teaching could also be used as a resource for my colleagues to view and offer constructive criticism. Through self-evaluation, I will get to know myself better in terms of my strengths and areas of development. (Participant II-F)

I would seek to answer the following three questions after every lesson: how did the lesson go? Why did it go that way? And what will I do next time? Answers to these questions will help me to improve my teaching. (Participant FG3-A)

From the above findings it can be noted that participants recognise the importance of the feedback to be gained from self and student evaluation. They are also aware that such evaluation ought to be guided by some questions. In order to facilitate such evaluation, participants intend to make use of video-recording and reflective journals. As a follow up on their evaluation, they also intend to give remedial lessons where things did not go well.

Mentoring and Peer Supervision

The participants also observed the importance of mentoring and peer supervision as part of their reflective practice. In this regard, the following views emerged:

I will observe other teachers as they teach and allow them to observe me then give me feedback so that I can improve on my weaknesses. Sharing of ideas and experiences with colleagues will probably help me a lot. (Participant II-A)

I believe that my improvement as a teacher can come through encouragement from other teachers who have been in the profession for a long time. I will observe other teachers and emulate their good points. (Participant II-H)

I think collaboration with colleagues with whom I share majors will also be important so that we can discuss how effectively we can teach those subjects. (Participant FG4-C)

To sum up, it can be pointed out that the participants observed the importance of sharing experiences with colleagues. They highlighted the value of observing and being observed by others and exchanging constructive feedback in the process.

Further Training and Research

The participants also seemed to agree that professional growth may also require them to further their studies and continue to learn. Some of them were very elaborative on how they would continue to learn with a view to growing professionally:

I will attend educational seminars and workshops where I will gather information about educational practices. I will also take relevant education courses online. (Participant II-B)

I will participate in workshops or professional meetings on teaching that will help to expand thinking. I will also read several books covering all aspects of the teaching process. (Participant II-D)

I am going to further my studies in master's and higher levels ... after I have taught in schools for a number of years and have enough experience to continue my studies. (Participant FG2-E)

The study found that the participants recognised that furthering their education would be beneficial in improving their teaching. Attending seminars and workshops were also cited as some of the requirements for continually improving teaching. They also acknowledged the importance of attending workshops. Some of them also realised the importance of improving their research skills and reading extensively. These findings support the observation made by Dervent (2015) that pre-service teachers have the ability to develop a better understanding of the skills and knowledge and they can develop self-awareness through reflection. The findings also reinforce the standpoint that reflective practice can and should be encouraged in different pedagogical contexts.

Discussion

As noted earlier, according to the Centric Reflection Model an educator has to consider different stages and angles in their application of reflective practice (Farrell 2014; Green 2006). In order to gain a comprehensive and meaningful view for improving teaching, educators have to reflect-for-action (the planning phase prior to the lesson), reflection-in-action (during the delivery of the lesson) and reflection-on-action (evaluating the lesson after delivery). In this regard, it can be noted that the interviewing process has helped the participants to get involved in a reflective exercise. Since they are at the final stage of their teacher training programme and about to start their teaching career, it is

noted that the majority of their reflective activities mainly evolved around reflecting for action.

While the participants' responses lack adequate theoretical precision, the participants used the knowledge and skills that they gained during their training to plan their careers and contemplate how well they will do their job. For instance they indicated that quality teaching begins with good planning, subject mastery, using a variety of teaching methods, flexibility in using teaching aids and media, motivating and encouraging students to actively participate in class, giving immediate feedback and regular positive reinforcement. Moreover, participants realise the importance of continuous professional development. Hence they are prepared to attend workshops and to pursue further studies. For example, they mention that they will enrol for master's degrees as well as PhD programmes. Furthermore they acknowledge the importance of reading extensively and researching about both pedagogic as well as content knowledge.

The Centric Reflection Model indicates that the practice of reflective teaching has to be approached from different dimensions such as egocentric, allocentric and macrocentric views. With regard to the egocentric reflection or view of self, some of the participants seem to be spot-on as they plan to conduct self-evaluation, keep reflective journals to record their thoughts and events surrounding their teaching, as well as video-tape themselves in class. In addition, they would also like to use some questions to guide their self-evaluation; That is, they plan to ask how the lesson went and why it went that way. Concerning the allocentric view or students' views, the participants anticipate that they will benefit from asking students to evaluate their teaching.

Concerning the macrocentric view or views of colleagues and the professional community, participants intend to seek feedback from their peers and mentors. In line with this dimension, some of participants stated that they will allow other teachers to observe and give them feedback on their teaching. In addition, some of the participants also plan to observe their colleagues, emulate and incorporate some of their good techniques into their own teaching. Thus the participants acknowledge the importance of collaborating and learning from their peers. This practice is in line with the constructivist approach and it promotes a culture of observation and critical dialogue within communities of practice, while at the same time fostering and validating the voice and experience of the student teacher (Harford and MacRuairc 2008). It can be noted that if all these dimensions of the Centric Reflection Model are made part of teachers' reflection activities, then richer feedback can be generated. This is why it can be anticipated that richer feedback would maximise the chances of developing professionalism among those who practise these reflective activities and, in the process, improve the quality of their teaching.

Limitations and Future Directions

While some of the findings suggested that the participants did to some extent reflect about how they are going to continue improving their teaching, however, some of their responses exhibited lack of theoretical precision. In this exercise, the participants were only able to reflect-for-action, which is before the actual teaching could have taken place. As such, some of their responses sounded superficial as though they merely conveyed what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. This constituted a major limitation to this paper. It would be necessary in future, to supplement interviews with observations and document analysis. These methods might also provide valuable insights regarding the student-teachers' trajectories in developing reflective practice. Thus, student-teachers could be observed during micro-teaching or teaching practice. They could be followed up to explore their reflection-in-action (during the actual teaching), as well as reflection-on-action (after teaching). This could also offer an opportunity to conduct document analysis of their self-reflection narratives (egocentric views), and, peer reviews conducted by their colleague on their teaching (macrocentric views), as well as learner reviews (allocentric views).

Conclusion

Fostering professionalism in the teaching career cannot be achieved by simply highlighting misconduct or weaknesses associated with beginning teachers. Rather, constructive steps have to be taken to identify and build on the positive attributes that teachers gained during their training. There is no better place to start than at the beginning. Hence it is important to instill reflective dispositions in pre-service or beginning teachers. Thus when teachers have conceptualised who they are and what they are about, this should equip them with the useful tools and foster readiness to face the challenges in the teaching career. Most importantly, this should curb unprofessionalism and misconduct associated with some of the teachers. Ultimately they could develop into competent and reflective professionals whom the nation can be proud of.

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