PGCE students' learning through reflective journaling during teaching practice: An exploratory study

Letlhoyo Segalo (iD)
Department of Educational and Professional Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Central University of Technology, Welkom, South Africa
lsegalo@cut.ac.za

Bekithemba Dube (iD)
School of Educational Studies, University of Free State, Phuthaditjhaba, South Africa

In the study reported on here the reflective journals of student teachers enrolled for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) were explored to determine what new learning they had acquired during their teaching practice. Reflection is a process of reviewing an experience of practice to analyse it for improvement. In this way, reflective journals could be viewed as a tool that moulds and harnesses the professional development of student teachers. Critical emancipatory research was adopted to reflect on student teachers' journaling as an important assessment tool to be used to empower students with pedagogical content to convey knowledge to learners. In the study we purposively sampled a selected group of 10 PGCE students' reflective journals. We found that students' reflective journals are important tools that shape student teachers' professional identities during teaching practice. Furthermore, we found that student teachers' journaling is an emancipatory platform that allows students teachers to think independently and innovatively to free their thoughts on real teaching and learning situations. We recommend that teacher training institutions should emphasise the importance of journaling in teacher training programmes with a focus on critical thinking and problem-solving innovation.

Keywords: learning; pedagogical content; Post-Graduate Certificate in Education; reflective journals; University of Technology

Introduction and Background

In this study, the reflective journals of student teachers enrolled for the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) were examined. The focus was to examine what new learning students had acquired during their teaching practice at the different schools. Firstly, it is important to reflect on the concept of reflective learning. Richards (2010:101) defines reflection as an activity in which an experience is recalled, considered and evaluated in relation to a situation. As such, the reflective process is regarded as a higher-order cognitive process where the practitioner evaluates past experiences and decides on what to do better or differently in the future (Graham & Phelps, 2003:3; Maarof, 2007:209).

Bulpitt and Martin (2005:210), Hatton and Smith (1995:33), Munby (1989:35), Nyaumwe and Mtetwa, (2011:153) and Rogers (2002:845) suggest that Boud, Dewey, Habermas, Schön, and Walker are the pioneers regarding student teachers' reflective journals. According to Rogers (2002:845), Dewey (1933) describes reflection as a rational and purposive action undertaken by a person. The rationality of reflection suggests a deliberate and voluntary effort that a student-teacher could engage in to establish a set of beliefs on his or her practice of teaching (Gordon & MacLeod, 2007:602). Schön (2001:186) on the one hand, focuses on student teachers' reflective journals during practice teaching with the aim of understanding and development of professional practice. Kinsella (2007:396) stresses that the basis of Schön's rational reflection was to improve professional practice which assumed that such a process would lead to a state of expertise in that field. Fleming (2007:661) highlights that Dewey and Schön's ideas demonstrate that their thinking is focused on scientific objectivity which allows the student teacher to control the immediate environment in which they might find themselves.

In contrast, Boud and Walker (1998:195) embrace the subjectivity of human emotions as central to their reflective learning. Boud (2001:2) argues that student teachers should be allowed the space to express their emotions which allow them to confront the perplexity of their teaching practice. In advancing the agenda for reflective learning, Habermas postures into critical reflection which forms the basis for transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003:60; Terry, 1997:272). Critical reflection suggests that student teachers should be conscious of the inherent historical constraints in their teaching spaces. In this way, by critically reflecting, student teachers are enabled or emancipated from the confines of their spaces to negotiate and to enable spaces, rather than reproducing those inhibiting spaces. Fleming (2007:659) and Lipp (2005:94) posit that emancipatory reflection, as embodied in critical reflection, enables student teachers to deal with challenging situations differently.

Concept Clarification: Reflective Journal

A reflective journal can take many forms such as a portfolio, diary, workbook, or blog (Francis, 1995:235; Maarof, 2007:214; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004:6; Taole, 2013:125; Van Wyk, Taole & Nkonyane, 2015:398; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996:65). A reflective journal is, therefore, a collection, selection and organisation of the student teacher's experiences over some time such as the period of school-based learning as is the case in our

study. Writing down their own thoughts and experiences enables student teachers to look at their efforts and set further goals on how to improve their practice. The nature of keeping a reflective journal is to allow the students time to ponder and reflect on what has occurred, what experiences they have had and more importantly, how to improve their professional practice (Clarke, 2004:2). Watson (2010:12) refers to reflective journaling as logical problem-solving processes that encapsulate emotions and intuition employed by students in their professional development. Reflective journals are used to assess students' reflective faculties and allow lecturers insight into how the student teachers conceptualise their practice and strive to overcome barriers that they face in their teaching spaces.

Reflective journals create an in-depth learning space where students, in their own words, find their voices about the ontology of their practice. By situating themselves within the framework of understanding their practice, they can transcend beyond what they learnt from books and their lecturers as they can confront the nature of teaching in the real world (Uline, Wilson & Cordry, 2004:457). Gaining one's voice is viewed as a liberating agent as it creates a space for empowerment and equality concerning the episteme of teaching and learning as experienced by student teachers (Wood, Seobi, Setlhare-Meltor & Waddington, 2015:82). Furthermore, a student teacher's reflective voice permits the construction of contextual knowledge that applies to a specific place and time. In this way, student teachers are afforded a chance of aligning their world of teaching with what is currently taking place in schools (Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk & Nguyen, 2015:226).

Context and Practice

This study was conducted at a university of technology in South Africa. PGCE students are postgraduate students enrol for a 1-year professional teaching programme. As would be expected, PGCE students enter the programme with limited teaching experience and theoretical educational grounding. Over a period of 6 months PGCE students are exposed to different educational and teaching contexts that provide them with the impetus for the teaching challenges. In addition, the students are exposed to micro-teaching which allow them to acquire the necessary teaching skills using a variety of approaches in a more controlled context.

The programme exposes students to a further 6 weeks of teaching practice at local schools, 2 weeks in the second term and a further 4 weeks in the third term. This process could be viewed as acculturation as students acquire new ways of teaching in an actual teaching environment. It is hoped that practical teaching at schools will enable the students teachers to integrate both the theory of education and teaching with their experiential encounters and to formulate new perspectives that enable them to develop professionally. PGCE students' reflective journals consist of students' written experiences of their school-based learning.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Emancipatory Research

In understanding PCGE students' reflections, the study was located within critical emancipatory research (CER), a theory that has links with critical thinking that was cultivated in Germany during the Weimar Republic. "Frankfurt scholars attempted to collaborate with philosophers, economists and psychoanalysts" (Wellmer, 2014:705) and the theory "emerged not only out of suspicions in the academy but also out of wider social movements and struggles against oppression which have found a voice in the academy" (Carrette & Keller, 1999:23). The theory has Marxist thinking (Schmidt, 2007) which, according to Nkoane (2012:99), has an "agenda to critique and challenge, to transform and empower; it is geared towards social justice and enhances the principles of democracy." As a theory, it sought to respond to "historical and social conditions of crisis and replace them with emancipatory ones" (Sinnerbrink, 2012:370).

Critical emancipatory research is of value since it argues for emancipation of people – in this case, PGCE students. As propounded by Demirović (2009), emancipation implies that all human beings should, without discrimination, participate in meaningful activities and shape their world to become a better place for all. Looking at the challenges faced by PGCE students, the theory is relevant in the sense that it provides "societies [universities] with common languages through which to address people's hopes and discontents" (Mendieta, 2005:80). The theory is relevant as underpinning of this study because it argues for the most humanising experience – one from which the researcher emerges more human, more cautious, with greater respect for and more open-minded to signals and messages from very diverse sources (Mahlomaholo, 2009:225). The theory, in short, contemplates, exposes, and questions hegemony, traditional power assumptions held about relationships, groups, communities, societies, and organisations to promote social change (Given, 2008:140). In the context of this study, CER encourages PGCE students to freely confront their lived realities within their teaching spaces. For instance, many student teachers' oblivious realities evaporate as they come across real teaching and learning situations that require adaptations, reflection and possible change using a different paradigm (Taole, 2013:124). The student teachers

realise the ontological genuineness of teaching and learning environments not being as stable, mechanical and smooth running as espoused in many texts and lecture rooms. The student teachers encounter teaching and learning environments characterised by chaos, instabilities and multiple realities (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009:352; Leke-ateh, Assan & Debeila, 2013:283; Mahende & Mabula, 2014:7; Usher & Edwards, 1994:11). Student teachers meet the unpredictable learning ecologies that are characterised by language barriers, social inequalities, teacher unionism, and uncontrollable classroom environments (Steyn, 2008:18; Stoughton, 2007:1032; Zeeman, Poggenpoel, Myburgh & Van der Linde, 2002:96).

As advocated by Habermas, the student-teacher will then be required to undergo a period of metamorphosis to mediate between his or her conceived reality and the new multiple realities of successful teaching (Lipp, 2005:94). Pitsoe, (2014:392) and Pitsoe and Letseka (2013:25) view student teachers' newly acquired practices and adaptations as enabling and emancipatory habitats to manage the emerging realities through a reflective process.

Problem Statement

Reflective journaling as a process of reflection is a provided space that enables student teachers to review their teaching practices outside of formal training (Taole, 2013:124). Student teachers' reflective journaling provides a safe and unprejudiced environment to reflect deeply on their teaching practices. Furthermore, it scaffolds student teachers to develop an improved view of their teaching landscape which is a necessity for their future teacher development (Zeeman et al., 2002:96). However, in our view, student journaling as a scaffolding process has some limitations as it only affords student teachers the opportunity to construct descriptions of their own teaching encounters.

We thus view student teacher journaling as a necessary element for student teachers' critical emancipation. For example, each student teacher can reflect on their unique teaching cases and provide past, present and future scenarios of addressing challenging teaching circumstances. Student teachers' journaling becomes important and relevant when the condition of self-awareness of the current conditions is created to provide an alternative practice for future teaching and learning encounters (Gonulal & Loewen, 2018:4).

Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative constructivist research design was employed for this research study. The rationale for using the relativist design system of an individual's belief and interpretation of what constitutes a fact assisted to understand the constructed reality of student teachers' reflective journaling. A constructivist inquiry approach is appropriate to explore PGCE students' reflective journals to determine what new constructed learning they had acquired during their teaching practice. What student teachers wrote and described in their journals entailed how they construed and constructed the meanings of the phenomena under study (Glesne, 2011:68; Maree, 2007:88).

The student teachers' reflective journals portrayed their subjective meanings of teaching practice encounters as being influenced by their social orientations and their experiences (Burnard, 2004:178). For example, a student teacher exposed to a democratic classroom environment will perceive learner experiences as an integral part of the teaching and learning process as opposed to a more conservative student teacher who will likely value the authority of the teacher as paramount to effective teaching.

Ten reflective journals out of a total of 83 were purposively sampled. We used a purposive sample as recommended by Etikan and Bala (2017:2). The rationale for using 10 purposively sampled reflective journals was not to generalise the findings but to discover how student teachers reflected on their acquired learning during their teaching practice.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the student teachers' reflective journals as document material. As such, the student teachers' written transcripts were used as data in this research study. The use of documents is commonly used in qualitative research as descriptions of the personal thoughts and perceptions of those being researched (Bowen, 2009:31).

To adhere to ethical requirements, the students who wrote the reflective journals were not named and the journal entries were labelled alphabetically from A to L (Gray, 2010:125; King & Horrocks, 2010:31; Kvale, 2010:14). The selected reflective journals were taken from the enclosure where they were stored and returned after they had been analysed.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was used to identify patterns and categorise the main themes emerging from the reflective journals (Braun & Clarke, 2019:591). The use of thematic data analysis was used to allow narrative reporting on the student teachers' expressions of their teaching by means of reflective journaling.

Trustworthiness

As suggested by Bowen, (2009:33), Creswell and Miller, (2000:126), the trustworthiness in this research was determined by the accuracy of the

findings of the study by establishing the meaning entailed in the student teachers' reflective journals and its contribution to the issues being explored, namely, student teachers' reflective journaling during teaching practice.

Gunawan (2015:10) states that a study is trustworthy when the researchers judge it to be in line with the current practices used in that research framework. Furthermore, Shenton (2004:64) asserts that the findings from the student teachers' reflective journals on teaching practice can be used in another study in a different context.

Findings and Discussion
The findings of this study were guided by the question, How do student teachers reflect on their teaching practice using reflective journals? It was assumed that the handwritten transcripts of student teachers would not reveal and capture all the daily and weekly observations and engagements on their teaching practice experiences. The themes that emerged from the student teachers' transcripts were categorised as follows:
- Teaching ethos and practice;
- Actual teaching;
- Selection of teaching material; and
- The use of classroom space.

Theme 1: Teaching Ethos and Practice
This theme relates to the student teachers' formative days at the school during their school teaching placement. The theme also relates to the personal and emotional experiences of their first day at the school. In many ways it could be said that it related to their interaction with and to their immediate spaces. Most of the journal entries focused on the student teachers' emotions – from feelings of nervousness to feelings of excitement. This implies that the awareness of the school environments could have a negative or a positive impact on the student teachers. The reception at the school and their expectations about the school played a key role in how they related to the imminence of their presence at the school. Furthermore, the teaching ethos and practice differed from one school to the other. For example, some schools were described as alert and dutiful while others were referred to as being lax. In journal entry C the student teachers described the teaching ethos as follows: "*Teachers seem to know what they are doing, and helpful to student teachers, they involved us in the school activities. This helped us to be focused and be part of the school.*"

The above-mentioned inscription described the importance of acknowledgement of student teachers by the school. This point is also advocated by Butler and Cuenca (2012:301) when they mention that the first reception of student teachers by mentor teachers is crucial in guiding student teachers in their professional development.

Furthermore, Campbell and Brummett (2007:52) add that the mentoring of student teachers assists in fostering self-belief, efficacy and observance of professional issues in the workplace. Inversely, a lack of proper mentoring and a lack of keenness by mentor teachers at the school could have adverse consequences for student teachers' professional development.

The following theme refers to the student teachers' reflections on their actual teaching experiences.

Theme 2: Actual Teaching Experiences
The theme of the teaching routine focused on the student teachers' actual teaching experiences. Given the opportunity to teach could be terrifying for many student teachers (Morgan, Callow-Heusser, Horrocks, Hoffmann & Kupferman, 2014:155). The teaching encounters as remised by the students was characterised by unpredictability. Journal entries illustrate that teaching was not an easy task as the schools', the learners' and the student teachers' expectations might not have been the same. In the beginning, the student teacher is a novice who is uncertain about the teaching terrain. The school expects of the student teacher to teach as it assumes that the student had undergone enough training.

> *Teaching Grade 11 learners could be terrifying. When I started my lesson, it was obvious that I was talking to myself as they were not listening. I almost lost my nerve as I came to realise that they were not listening, and they could not respond to the questions that I asked. When I started to write on the chalkboard, I could feel the laughing faces at the back of my head. I started drifting away from my lesson as I had to deal with discipline issues. Every time I went to that class, I wore a hard mask.* (Journal entry D)

The above entry demonstrates that learner discipline was a challenge. It further shows that student teachers needed more training on how to handle learner discipline at schools. In order to address student teachers' fear of teaching senior classes, Poulou (2007:213) and Yeung and Watkins (2000:229) highlight the importance of the development of student teachers' self-efficacy at an early stage of their careers. According to Yeung and Watkins (2000:221) the student teacher should be able to reflect on what was taught at the institution to compare it with what is happening at the school where they are placed.

Theme 3: Selection of the Teaching Material
The selection of teaching content and teaching media plays an important role in harnessing student teachers' self-belief. The guidance provided on following the prescribed themes and how to approach them are crucial elements for a novice teacher. As such, the role of the mentor teacher assigned to a student is important. In this regard, some of the students' writings showed that in some

instances they were motivated and led by the hand by the mentor teachers. The unfortunate student teachers were left in the deep end, which might have resulted in negative teaching experiences. Journal entry A, for example, shows a negative teaching experience:

> *I was expecting that I will be allowed to observe a few lessons presented by the mentor teacher. However, on the first day, she was assigned a task by the school principal. As such, I was given a textbook and chapter that I had to teach, I was not prepared to do so. I did it anyway. This became a long day for me at the school.*

The encounter described in the above excerpt is a demonstration of the pressure that some schools, where there is little time for mentoring students teachers, exert on the students. However, such experiences could afford the students with a feeling of self-belief and the opportunity to assert themselves (Azar, 2010:181). Journal entry I captures a positive experience in that the mentor teacher allowed the student-teacher to learn by observation.

> *I spent 2 days observing my mentor teacher teach Grade 10s and 11s over a period of 2 days. This opportunity allowed me time to prepare for my classes. We discussed the topics that I was going to teach and the teaching aids that go with those lessons. I had a great time and I enjoyed every minute of it.*

The above-mentioned observation suggests that student teachers should be able to rely on mentor or senior teachers as resources that assist them. Gibbs (2003:2) attests that student teachers tend to be more innovative, resilient and persevering when they are exposed to working with a good mentor teacher. Gibbs' (2003) observation is echoed by Maphalala (2013:126) and Mukeredzi and Mandrona (2013:145), when they report on student teachers during teaching practice in a rural school in South Africa. They mention that the student teachers were warmly welcomed at the school and they felt that they were ready to start working at the school. However, Boboc (2012:146) insists that student teachers should break away from predetermined and known school cultures. This autonomy (Boboc, 2012) is an enabling agent for student teachers to make sense of their new learning and not reproduce a set of fixed responses in their student journals.

Theme 4: The Use of Classroom Space

Classroom space refers to the environment in which teaching and learning take place. A teaching space will, therefore, consist of all the elements that are found in such a space, namely, the teacher, the learners, furniture and elements that enable or constrict effective teaching and learning. In all likelihood the student teacher has little to offer or change elements of the classroom space such as the furniture. As such, the student teacher is confined to teach within what is available in that space.

Journal entry E indicates the following about the classroom space:

> *There is virtually nothing one can do to change the layout of the classroom. Learners are seated in table rows by the class teacher. Therefore, student-teacher only teaches and has little influence. It would have been better if the class teachers give us more freedom to contribute the little, we can add* [*sic*].

The excerpt above indicates that the classroom layouts in South African schools might limit the innovation and creativity of student teachers to contribute to a meaningful classroom teaching space. However, Amin and Ramrathan (2009:74) refer to what they call disrupting experience, destabilising learning and reconstructing uncertainty among student teachers. By disrupting experience they (Amin & Ramrathan, 2009) infer that student teachers should be exposed to teaching context that are different from their own experiences. In a way, in a postmodern ambit reflective journaling should lead student teachers to destabilising learning points to the notion of being innovative – even in constricted teaching and learning spaces. The idea of reconstructing uncertainty is to expose student teachers to be context sensitive and to embrace the shifting paradigms of the reality in schools (Kiggundu & Nayimuli, 2009:353; Nkambule & Mukeredzi, 2017:9). Pollard (2014:104–120) asserts that the other objectives of teaching practice is to emphasise the importance of creating safe schools for learners and teachers that encourage respect for human rights, discipline learners, respect learners' rights and dignity and equip learners to achieve their full potential.

Recommendations

We recommend that teacher training institutions should expose student teachers to critical thinking pedagogy at an earlier stage of their training. This view presupposes that student teachers reflect differently on their experiential training. Furthermore, in a critical thinking framework student teachers' ideas in their journals can play an important role in harnessing their self-belief, confidence, critical thinking and innovation. Lastly, we recommend that reflective journals are used as tools that enable and connect student teachers' professional development.

Conclusion

The changing world of teaching, such as technological development, teaching in a constricted classroom, uncertain world, require student teachers who can reflect critically on their own teaching and teaching circumstances. The findings of the study demonstrate that the way in which student teachers reflect on their teaching can provide a limited view of their intense critical reflection. The student teachers' reflection showed

that teaching was not an easy process. We conclude by stating that the schools where student teachers are placed and the training institutions should not forget that the student teachers are novices and are still learning.

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Authors' Contributions

L Segalo wrote the abstract, introduction and literature review, collected and analysed the data. B Dube wrote the research design and theoretical part. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

Notes

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