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Reflective Written Pieces: Inquiry into the Practices of Pre-service Literacy Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to explore whether a reflective writing strategy, developed and used with pre-service teachers in a literacy methods course, assisted them with integrating theory and practice. The teacher educator analyzed the written reflective pieces and determined common categories. Study findings revealed some themes: meeting student needs, classroom strategies, field link experiences, personal student experiences, and growth statements. Pre-service teachers explored what their current knowledge was and how it had changed through the time spent reading and writing in the course; imbedded within the reflection pieces were references to practicum experiences with students in classrooms. Through the act of writing their thoughts down, they indicated changes in their individual views about how to approach literacy teaching. Findings reveal that the reflective writing strategy served as an effective starting point for pre-service literacy teachers' emerging development.

Introduction

Having an interest in both literacy course content and the practices of literacy teacher educators, as an education professor, I have studied the effectiveness of selected pedagogical strategies I use in courses with pre-service teachers (McIntosh, 2004, 2006). My previous study findings about written response to text, specifically journaling, have brought further questions forward. Believing that the act of writing can be used to foster thinking and generate new ideas and understanding, I wondered about the value of implementing a writing strategy in my literacy course. Would it assist pre-service teachers with engaging more deeply in the course readings, thereby providing greater opportunities for connecting theory and practice in literacy teaching? Currently, my pre-service teachers explore theory through reading assigned course articles; they focus on reading and writing theories, their influence on classroom practices including selecting varied teaching strategies and resources for use with grade 7 -10 students. Particular emphasis is placed on the theory of response to literature, and writing as process.

Upon reflection, I felt that guiding pre-service teachers as they internalized and applied aspects of literacy teaching in practice required further thought; an inquiry into my own teaching practice was timely. Teacher research would provide the chance to explore the effectiveness of a new approach and its impact on pre-service teachers. I decided to consider how writing could be integrated with reading, thereby providing pre-service teachers with individual opportunities for connecting theory and practice in literacy teaching. If they had a chance to write, as they read course articles, would they more readily transfer this acquired knowledge into practicum and their future classrooms?

Creating and implementing a specific “reflective” writing strategy would also address the required standards. Two of the Standards of Practice for the teaching profession in Ontario, Canada are *professional knowledge* and *professional practice* (Ontario College of Teachers, 2012). Members should “strive to be current in their professional knowledge and recognize its relationship to practice”; this expectation can be met as they “refine their professional practice through ongoing inquiry, dialogue and reflection” (OCT, p. 13). Pre-service teachers might develop this reflective stance during their literacy course work, if I could modify my past classroom approach; creating a reflective writing strategy was a first step. Responses to assigned professional readings in literacy journals would be the focus for their written pieces. Therefore, this study examines the extent to which pre-service teachers can develop and enhance their practical knowledge in the teaching of grades 7-10 literacy by using the reflective writing strategy. Analysis of these written reflections could help me learn about whether pre-service teachers were able to apply their understanding of theory to their practice through the act of writing.

Literature Review

Research on teacher education and more specifically literacy education, reflective practice, reflective writing, and practical knowledge provided a framework for this study. Studies on U.S. teacher education programs and specifically teacher knowledge, tools for learning to teach English language arts, and practices of beginning teachers have been conducted by Grossman & Shulman (1994), Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999), and Grossman, Valencia, Evans, Thompson, Martin, and Place (2000). Shoffner (2009) explored pre-service English teachers’ reflective practice and the importance of opportunities for examining personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

In Canada, research by Beck, Kosnik, and Rowsell (2007) and Kosnik and Beck (2008) made significant contributions to both literacy and teacher education fields through the *Teacher Education for Literacy Teaching* project. Beck & Kosnik (2007) emphasized that student teachers needed opportunities to discuss the implications of theory; combining theory and practical concerns rather than teaching them separately was highlighted.

Schön (1987) defined a *reflective practitioner* as one who makes the conscious effort to explore an issue and seek a conclusion, while purposefully engaging in reflective thinking. In the preparation of reflective practitioners (Larrivee, 2008), processes that explicitly prompted one to think and respond were valued.

Writing’s relationship with reflection (Daudelin, 1996) and the ability to write out reflections varied greatly with individuals. A writer’s comfort with the tool had some impact. Using support tools such as learning journals deepened reflective practice (Collin,

Karsenti, & Komis, 2013; Moon, 2006). Critical reflection in the preparation of teachers was promoted by researchers (Ryan, 2013; Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000); their studies revealed that when writing was used to encourage pre-service teachers to make connections between content and practical experiences, it enhanced their reflective abilities. Ryan (2013) concluded that students should be taught *how* to reflect and pedagogical strategies can be identified. The positive impact of carefully guided mentoring of the writing process (Pedro, 2005) and the developmental nature of reflection (Griffin, 2003) was explored.

Benefits of assuming an inquiry stance during teacher development were identified. Student teachers' engagement in reflection through journal writing as they learned to teach, and teacher inquiry were studied by Cochran-Smith (1991) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001). McGuire, Lay, and Peter (2009) focused on a pedagogical strategy that educators of professionals used for encouraging self-reflection and critical thinking: the reflection paper facilitated student learning of knowledge and skills.

Clandinin (1986) defined practical knowledge and reflection: "reflection is lodged within a theory of experience. It is through reflection that we come to challenge our assumptions and reconstruct our experiences; theory emerges from and is inseparable from practice" (pp. 167-171). For Connelly & Clandinin (1988), *personal practical knowledge* "captures the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons... ..our knowledge of ourselves is PPK" (pp. 25-26).

Methodology

In my literacy course, pre-service teachers were assigned articles for weekly reading. Small group discussion, mini-lessons, modeling/presenting of teaching activities and whole class discussion were some of the strategies I used. Written reflection pieces were created by the pre-service teachers after they had read and responded to professional readings over a six-month period. A quote card recording strategy involved the course participants in selecting three quotes and writing each on one side of an index card. On the reverse side of the card, they responded to the selected quote. Writing in first person, they recorded reactions including classroom experiences of a personal nature or those from practice teaching, observations, thoughts, inquiry questions, and any ideas related to their reading of the text. Upon completion of the quote card reflections, they re-read all cards, considered a significant issue they had addressed, and then developed a 500-word written reflection piece. At the end of the course, after all assessment was completed, I invited the pre-service teachers to participate in the study, through sharing their assignment with me.

Data was 97 reflective written pieces of 500 words each, which study participants wrote for a final course assignment. Over a two-year period, all participants were pre-service teachers enrolled in one of the intermediate (grades 7 -10) literacy methods courses taught by me. The teacher education program was one year in duration; therefore, the data for the study was acquired from four different classes of pre-service teachers. I asked three research questions: (1) Can the development of practical knowledge be enhanced through using a reflective writing strategy in a pre-service course? (2) How does this type of writing task help pre-service literacy teachers? (3) What are the qualities of the writing itself?

The 97 written reflection pieces were the focus for data analysis. After I collected and photocopied the written pieces, the originals were returned to the participants. Four data sets (2 in year 1 and 2 in year 2) were created and numbered 1, 2, 3 and 4. Then a period followed and the participants were each assigned a number from 1 onward (ie. 3.7). I conducted a retrospective content analysis of these written pieces. Preliminary data analysis occurred through the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Themes and patterns emerged as I coded and analyzed the data in order to develop categories and identify their respective properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Through teacher research, I used qualitative research techniques to analyze the written reflection pieces. Beginning with a desire to adjust the approach I had used with pre-service literacy teachers to acquire theory, I introduced a new strategy (reflective written piece), which I implemented in the course. An attempt to improve my practice was the intent, and this was coupled with the goal of enhancing the pre-service teachers' learning experiences. While analyzing the data, I noted the effectiveness of the new strategy. Reflexivity had a role in the method; my process included reflecting on my own practice, as well as an awareness of its impact on others – the pre-service teachers. In considering literacy teaching, I recognized that even as an experienced literacy teacher/educator, it continued to be important to explore both my theoretical and content-based understanding. Theory grounds instructional practice; the challenge pre-service teachers encountered was that with limited classroom time, they were in the early stages of observing/reflecting/enacting theory into practice. The newly implemented written reflection piece strategy provided chances for them to consider theory by applying it to their current practice, and thinking forward to future classroom experiences. For me, as their teacher, I learned from their writing. In the data analysis, I considered the impact of their immersion in this classroom strategy.

Study Findings

Some common categories revealed after analysis of the written pieces included: gender and literacy, meeting student needs, classroom strategies, practical links to field experience, personal experience as a student and growth statements. Examples from participants' reflective pieces were provided to demonstrate the nature of each theme.

Gender and Literacy

Writing reflection pieces provided pre-service teachers with a chance to explore their concerns about the literacy issue of gender. Observations in classrooms revealed different reading and writing characteristics of boys and girls.

In one reflective piece, a study participant wrote:

When looking at the gender gap, one must look at girls as well as boys. Reading so much with a focus on boys' literacy makes me worry about the girls...it is also important that while we change some literary expectations to not limit the boys, that we don't focus on them to such a degree that female role-models become even less frequent.

Differing literacy expectations for girls and boys were highlighted by this writer. It seemed that the reading(s) revealed an imbalance, and a caution was bought forward.

Perhaps articles the pre-service teachers encountered that year emphasized challenges with boys' literacy practices and overlooked references to girls' literacy. This was an area worthy of further exploration.

Meeting Student Needs

Pre-service teachers seemed to recognize the importance of putting students at the forefront as a best practice in classrooms. The teacher's role was to consider *all* students, not just those who were identified, therefore, differentiation in classrooms was a possible consideration.

One study participant revealed:

I had originally thought that equipping students with 'the correct answer' would be the most beneficial for them, but through trying out student response activities and discussing real life connections, I have come to realize that perhaps equipping students with the tools is more valuable than equipping them with answers.

The idea of the teacher as "all-knowing" has passed; this caused comfort for those new to teaching. Some content-based understanding was necessary for beginning teachers as they created strategies to assist students with discovering their own answers.

Classroom Strategies

The challenge of a teacher's role was recognized in the following excerpt. Selected strategies were highlighted in written pieces by pre-service teachers, possibly as a means of working through *how* they could enhance their future teaching practice.

A statement by one participant was "I know that as a teacher I cannot always do what I feel is comfortable for me to do; I have to do what my students will benefit from the most and book clubs are the answer."

Co-operative learning strategies provided chances for student engagement in literature. I wonder if a course reading explored the book group strategy and emphasized its positives for students. It appeared that the writer was considering changing their point of view, perhaps as a result of their reading.

Practical Field Experience Links

Practice teaching experiences, integrated with theoretical course work, gave pre-service teachers valuable time in classrooms with students. A participant wrote:

I worked in a class where the students were reluctant learners and often did not show up to class...in my first lesson, I wanted to focus on the literature itself...since the students did not respond well to this lesson, I revamped my approach for the next class where I focused the lesson on their personal reaction to the texts...The result was amazing. The students quickly became engaged.

This writer revealed that through allowing personal choice and response in classrooms, both students and teachers benefitted during the learning process. It seemed that the observation, and reflection by the pre-service teacher resulted in a positive learning experience, as well.

Personal Experience as a Student

Pre-service teachers considered the impact their student teaching experience had on forming their teacher selves. Upon reflection, does one teach the way they were taught and how might emerging practice be influenced by the opportunity to record one's thoughts in a reflective piece?

One participant wrote:

According to Reader Response theory, students draw their own meaning and theme from the text, based on their own experiences, and knowledge. Traditionally, when I attended a secondary school English course, I was evaluated on my ability to critically analyze literature and make theme-based connections between novels, through the teacher's implementation of written tests. As a student, I was a passive learner, repeating the teacher's conceptions of the novel, and her own personal, critical analysis of its meaning, in my written work. At times, I felt un-validated as an avid reader and student of literature.

Reference to a specific theory (encountered in the literacy course) demonstrated what this writer may have considered after a course reading. It was interesting to note how one's memory of a student experience impacted a change in a novice teacher's chosen classroom practice.

Growth Statements

Changes in views of pre-service teachers during the course of the term were revealed through use of "I" and a reflective stance.

A participant recorded:

Much of my resistance to reader response theory and the strategies it entails lay in one basic and fundamentally erroneous preconception: I, as teacher, know the answers. It has been difficult for me to relinquish the duty of 'clarifier of text' and 'bringer of interesting ideas'. Having studied and enjoyed English for more years than I care to remember, I believed that I was the one who would bring forth the students' excitement and inspire them to follow the path I trod...What I have come to realize is that a balance must be struck.

One's view as a "student of English" changed over time as opportunities were given to observe or ponder by reading articles, and after spending time with students in classrooms, as a "teacher of English". How one was taught impacted the way they chose to teach; this writer revealed a disconnect with a course reading which stimulated a possible change in beliefs about the teaching of English.

Discussion

Within the reflective pieces, pre-service teachers show some evidence of personal thought about theory and practice in the teaching of literacy. Practical knowledge is developed over time and enhanced through the act of writing. By using a specific writing strategy, they have the opportunity to read, write and reflect on the theoretical course readings, and then consider how certain aspects could be related to their practice. They

explore what their current knowledge is and how it changes through time spent reading (and writing) in the course; imbedded within the reflection pieces are references to practicum experiences with students in classrooms. Through the act of writing their thoughts down, they indicate changes in their individual views about how to approach the teaching of literacy.

Moon (2006) emphasizes the value of *secondary reflection* “it is a deliberate re-reading ...[of] what we have written, and then writing some further thoughts” (p. 112). There is a strong parallel between her work and the two-part reflective writing strategy I implement in the literacy course. Although the focus for content analysis in this study was the reflection piece (2nd reflection), it was important to consider the quote cards students first create. Serving as a means of inviting students to record initial reflections, upon completion, the re-reading of all quote cards resulted in selection of a single focus; creating the final written reflection piece seemed to provide students with greater opportunities for deeper thinking about their chosen issue.

As I indicate in past research (McIntosh, 2006, p. 25), I believe that a substantial theoretical component is required in teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers need opportunities for discussion of a theory’s practical implications (Beck, Kosnik & Rowsell, 2007). Although theory can be introduced to pre-service teachers through direct instruction, internalizing it can be a challenge for those new to the teaching profession. Study results indicate that the act of writing one’s thoughts down provide an avenue to help achieve this goal. As pre-service teachers refer to assigned readings in their reflective pieces, they incorporate observations that they make in practicum classrooms. Therefore, they are engaging in a process of making connections between theory and its relevance in their classroom practice.

Of particular interest to me was the category called “growth statements” where pre-service teachers view themselves as “teachers of English” rather than “students of English.” They are beginning to consider the impact personal experiences have on the way they believe a teacher should be teaching literacy classes. A desire to teach differently from the way they were taught is revealed. Movement from student to teacher persona is evident in many of the reflective pieces; they refer to practicum experiences or comment on what they plan to do in their future classrooms. Developing one’s practical knowledge is an on-going process in the early years of teaching.

Although the content analysis has revealed *what* was in each of the written pieces, further exploration of *how* pieces are written is worthy of study. How can the writing itself be described? I recognize that the meaning of *what* is written can often be influenced by *how* it is written. How is thinking or depth of thought revealed on the page? As evidenced by the consistent use of first-person “I”, the pieces show an informal tone and are personal in nature; personal pronouns, proper nouns, active voice are characteristics of the writing. I wonder whether selected wording and phrases reveal authenticity and honesty within the writing. Study data of written reflection pieces may be seen as “an entrée into thinking and expressing their [participants’] insights about what they read” (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013, p. 257). Moving beyond the surface, and exploring the participants’ writing style in their written pieces could provide me, as a researcher, with an opportunity to closely examine the writing variables of audience, purpose, and voice (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013). Conducting a

case study of a few participants might be an appropriate approach for future teacher research.

For this study, there were some limitations. Additional data was not gathered in the practicum classrooms of study participants. Practicum experiences impacted their reflective stance in the written pieces as they wrote about time spent with students in classrooms, but did the theory (from the assigned readings) preface the practicum or was it the other way around? This was difficult to determine since the written pieces were recorded at the end of the course when pre-service teachers would have completed 13 weeks of practicum and 18 weeks of course work. Practicum experience in their teacher education program was distributed into two, three and six week blocks for a total of 13 weeks. Course work occurred between practicum blocks for four or five weeks at a time. Integration of course work and practicum is a strength of this program model, but the question for me, as a teacher-educator is whether one can separate the two; they are, in fact, intertwined.

Conclusion

Conducting this teacher research has been an enlightening experience; I have the opportunity to reflect on my practice and the links between theory and practice in literacy teaching. I've always considered the course readings to be the literacy *theory* of my course, and the *practice* to be the in-classroom experiences. In fact, some of the course readings are not theoretical in nature, but present practical strategies, informed by a writer's *understanding* of a theory. Professional journals are the source for literacy course readings therefore, teachers or teacher educators are the writers. Knowledge of literacy theory is necessary to make informed decisions about teaching strategies best suited to meet student needs in classroom programs.

Now, I realize that significant time is required to allow for greater understanding, and although assigning reading of course articles to pre-service teachers is appropriate, the reflective time and means should be emphasized. The missing part of the process in my past practice has been not allowing enough time in my course, or patience in myself, to develop this aspect of my teaching. Through creating and implementing the written piece in the course, I observe that the act of writing in a personal, and reflective manner does guide my students into deeper thinking. This characteristic is revealed within their reflective pieces. Perhaps slowing down the *learning* process, and providing more *thinking* time for considering links between theory and practice is what the pre-service teachers benefit from the most of all.

When these pre-service teachers are in their novice years, immersed in classroom practice, their understanding of professional readings may be enhanced as they have greater opportunities for considering the impact of literacy theory on their practice *as they teach*. Some may choose to continue reading articles in literacy journals, or perhaps re-read course articles with fresh eyes as they explore their teacher selves. The written piece used in my literacy course provides an ideal starting point for pre-service teachers to develop their knowledge of literacy teaching; therefore, I will continue to use this course assignment. Assigning fewer articles for course reading, and including more class time for discussion will be another change in my future practice. Looking forward, my plan is to

delve into examining other pedagogical tools that may benefit pre-service teachers. Engaging in a reflective writing strategy is of value as it offers possibilities for pre-service teachers to deepen their understanding of literacy concepts and the impact on future classroom practice.

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