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The value and purpose of reflective practice for professional learning.

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This article focuses on the importance of teachers growing their reflective skills and implementing them as foundations to their beginning professional practice. Doing so will prepare teachers for the various challenges and situations that they will encounter in their teaching careers. The author considers reflection through an analogy of gardening in which teachers, who are reflective, can be considered as being gardeners of their practice. This is to paint a picture of both the general and personal aspects of reflective practice, which will be different for all teachers. The value and benefits of reflection will also be discussed so that all teachers can understand why reflective practice is important, particularly to grow at the beginning of teachers' careers. Furthermore, challenges to implementing reflective practice will be explained before sharing some important points about how teachers can use reflective practice to grow their professional learning.

Introduction

There are many factors that support a teacher to feel ready to teach, however a major contribution to teacher readiness is the ability to continue to engage in professional learning after graduating from initial teacher education. For teachers in New Zealand, their continuous learning journey can be supported through the use of reflective practice. Therefore, the aim for this article is to promote the value and purpose of reflective practice, which is multidimensional and can look different depending on the contexts and challenges teachers encounter. Reflection is a skill that is fostered at the beginning of a teacher's learning journey, usually through tertiary studies. Once reflective skills have been learnt, they can be nurtured over time, underpinning practices and helping the development of teachers' understanding of professional knowledge as they enter the teaching profession.

What is reflection for teachers? Analogy from the author

Becoming reflective is not something that can be prescribed and the implementation of reflective practice is challenging to explain (Larrivee, 2000). For myself as a teacher, I liken reflective practice to gardening. The sole purpose of gardening is to create a garden that thrives and flourishes, uniquely and

autonomously to how the gardener wishes. The gardener in this analogy is the teacher, with the garden being our professional practice and the act of gardening connecting to reflection.

When you reflect, you might start with a simple idea about your practice that you would like to implement or add to your teaching repertoire, the idea in this case could be the planting of a seed. In order for the seed to grow, you need to be able to water it, feed it and weed around it for the seed to take root. Much like a seed, ideas can only come into fruition through nurturing. This process involves researching, asking questions, communicating the idea to others and learning more about how the idea manifests your teaching. Furthermore, perhaps you noticed that the garden has weeds that need to be pulled out, which is much like our practice as sometimes we have habits, challenges or areas of our practice that need to be addressed. Moreover, there may have been an idea that grew from a long time ago, but if the practice is now old or out of date, it needs to be pulled out along with the weeds. You may also have an area of your practice that you need to dig deeper for a bigger idea to be planted and take root. The main message at the end of the day is that a garden is never finished and can always be maintained, grown, cut back and new things planted – as a gardener, it is a lifelong journey.

The benefits of reflection

Contextualises a person's own values and beliefs

Reflection can support teachers to examine their own identities as practitioners, which will support them to contextualise their values and beliefs about teaching. Reflective practice can serve as a way of uncovering what really matters to a teacher, and help them to understand that their priorities may not be the same as other teachers. Gibbs (1998 as cited in Pendrey, 2023) shares that most teachers will begin their careers imitating observed practices of other teachers that they have had throughout their lives. The implication is that if teachers do not implement reflective practice, they stay stagnant in those same practices, expectations and judgements (Larrivee, 2000). Teachers can start to discover and create meaning from their own values continuously through reflecting on what they are doing and why they are doing it (Larrivee, 2000; Šarić & Šteh, 2017). Furthermore, when a teacher has a robust philosophy of teaching, they grow in their self-awareness and self-efficacy, meaning that they are more likely to follow authentic professional learning opportunities that connect with what they may be passionate about or address their challenges (Azim, 2017). Reflection is considered a key driver of teacher professional identity, confirming research that suggests reflective practice positively influences teachers' professional identities (Azim, 2017).

Transformative thinking

Reflective practice empowers teachers to continually deepen their professional knowledge and understanding for the betterment of their learning. Recent literature on teacher reflection has used the

term ‘transformation’ to describe the benefits related to teacher improvement through reflective practice. For example, Rix and Paige-Smith (2012) and McLeod (2019) have referred to reflective practice as promoting ‘transformative thinking’, Nolan and Guo (2022) use the phrase ‘transformative learning’ and Hannaway (2022) refers to ‘transformed teachers’. Transformative thinking refers to the cognitive pathways that are constructed with the introduction of new solutions, perspectives and a critical awareness of assumptions where there may not have been awareness before (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2012; Šarić & Šteh, 2017). Teachers can then dissect different aspects of their practice or different topics impacting on their practice in a new light.

In this context, teachers are more disposed to analyse issues and challenges in their practice because they are open to change and improvement. Larrivee (2000) points out that teachers can sometimes rely on automatic responses to different situations because of previous experiences, assumptions or beliefs. However, if a teacher has the skill to create new perspectives, their responses to issues or challenges can be transformed. Similarly, McLeod (2019) explains that open-mindedness supports the ability to see critical incidents and challenges clearly. Teachers can openly take risks with analysis or experiments, minimising the urge to keep comfortable, avoid issues or challenges, because they know all possible outcomes are opportunities for further reflection (Larrivee, 2000; McLeod, 2019; Šarić & Šteh, 2017). Kaiako can then use their transformative thinking to create space for transformative action.

Improvement of learning and practice

The outcome of reflective practice is the sustainable development of professional learning and improvement of practice. If teachers have a good understanding of their own values and beliefs, have the skills to transform their way of thinking and are aware of issues or challenges, this leads to an improvement of practice. Reflection elicits responses and action in teachers’ practices, empowering them to make tangible changes to their own practice because they have been challenged or enlightened (McLeod, 2019). The Education Review Office (ERO, 2017) agrees that reflection enhances learning as they recommend that for newly graduated teachers to improve in their confidence and preparedness to teach, they need to use reflection to learn about the application of practice. This is further illustrated by Coleman (2022) who indicates that readiness to teach relies on teachers’ consistent reflections, suggesting that it supports the growth of dynamic and professional teachers.

The challenges of reflection

Reflection without learning

As mentioned above, reflection supports transformative learning and can spur transformative practice, however if a teacher implements reflection without any changes or improvements, the lessons from reflective practice can be missed. Without deliberate strategies or practices evolving after the

implementation of reflective practice, there would be no evidence to suggest effective learning occurred and teachers' initial assumptions or beliefs would remain unchanged (Brierley, 2019; Nolan & Guo, 2022). Mansvelder-Longayroux, Beijaard and Verloop's (2007) study analysing student teachers' reflections found that the majority of them were based on recollections or descriptions of completed experiences. This indicated that the in-depth learning processes, analysis, critical processing, diagnosis or reflection were minimal, leading to little or no change in practice. The researchers (Mansvelder-Longayroux et al., 2007) concluded that students were more worried about how they would be perceived by their assessors, focusing more on the product of the performance of teaching rather than the process of learning. Šarić & Šteh (2017) also identified this as a challenge, noting that student teachers were hesitant to show honesty in their summative assessments for fear that discussion of their strengths and weaknesses would appear as deficiencies in their teaching.

Intellectualising reflection rather than personalising

Further to the above, if student teachers or newly graduated teachers are more worried about their performance rather than the product of their learning, they may end up prioritising making their reflections appear more academic rather instead of authentically addressing what is happening in their own practice. While there is the need for informed discussions to occur, reflective writing or reflective practice may feel like an obligation for students or newly graduated teachers (Šarić & Šteh, 2017). This raises questions about the authenticity of reflective practice and whether significant and practical ideas are being meaningfully explored. It can be seen as restricting reflections when essential ideas are led more by curriculum goals or policies (Rix & Paige-Smith, 2012). While reflective practice could be misconstrued as being entirely personal, it is important to include informed professional discussions to ensure that reflections are justified with contextual evidence (Brock, 2015). Therefore, a balance between theory and practice shared is essential when reflecting.

Recipe following

While frameworks or models can have a place in fostering teacher readiness, Šarić & Šteh (2017) explain that it is crucial to ensure that reflection is not reduced to prescribed steps or to rationalise reflective writing or practice into a model. This is because following a structure may deter teachers from their autonomous learning as they could feel that their reflections are being controlled or manipulated to fit a particular purpose. Learning is multi-layered and teachers have differences in how they accumulate and retain information, therefore there is no 'one size fit's all' when it comes to reflective writing, in fact a model may even demotivate teachers' reflective thoughts (Šarić & Šteh, 2017). Pendrey (2023) supports this notion by encouraging readers to remember who they are as unique individuals in their reflective practice. Prescribed models have also been seen to positively support teacher readiness and professional

learning; however, reflections do not have to be perfect and there are a range of different ways teachers can reflect (McLeod, 2019; Pendrey, 2023).

Time constraints

While the aim and aspirations of kaiako may be to engage in reflective practice regularly, the practicalities of time can be a barrier or challenge to implementing this meaningfully in practice. Nolan and Guo (2022) found that this was a major barrier in their research on professional learning for all teachers. Teachers shared that it was hard to prioritise reflective practice because of the busyness of their days, with some even feeling overwhelmed at the start of the project. The allocation of workloads for general teaching tasks was not conducive to a professional learning environment in this case, because reflective practice or inquiry was not incorporated directly (Nolan & Guo, 2022).

Implementation to support professional learning

Critical reflection

Reflection starts with an enquiring mind, questioning why we do the way we do things and being honest about how well things are working or not working (Pendrey, 2023). For teachers to engage in critical reflection, they need to go deeper than providing reflective thoughts. Critical reflection looks into specific topics, issues, assumptions and challenges, thoroughly unpacking these topics from all angles. In order to ensure our reflective practice is critical, it helps to look at practice, situations or challenges as layers to explore. For example, Gibbs (1998 as cited in Pendrey, 2023) discusses the use of a six-point model: Description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. As previously mentioned, models or structures can be seen as a challenge in reflective practice, however literature has also celebrated the use of models, for example the 'Smyth model' (1993) and the 'Stop, think, change model' (O'Connor & Diggins, 2002), mainly because they help learners to understand that simply describing a situation is not enough to gain critical traction (Šarić & Šteh, 2017). Critically reflective practice does not have to just be formal written records in the form of models, as mentioned above. Informal thoughts, discussions and journals can provide equally valuable analytical information that supports professional learning. Schon (1983 as cited in Pendrey, 2023) described this as reflection in-action where you might be evaluating, tweaking or changing your teaching practices throughout your day or throughout experiences in real time.

Collective reflection

In our professional practice, we work collaboratively within teams of teachers, therefore collective reflection can be a way to implement reflective practice in a way that is meaningful to the individual but also to the group. Grey (2011) suggests that teachers can reflect collectively about the values and beliefs

of the team and of the centre in order to support shared goals and promote the application of curriculum decisions. This type of reflection is fostered through professional dialogue where each teacher involved in the discussion has the opportunity to share their perspective on a situation, event, or challenge. This gives the teachers the chance to be exposed to new ideas or awareness of other ways of thinking, which will help grow a culture of critically reflective practice (Grey, 2011). This type of continuous reflective dialogue can also be connected to a professional learning community, where a collective body of people shares a common vision and learning aspirations within their practice (Denee, 2024). When collective reflection is utilised in a professional learning community, this empowers all participating teachers to take responsibility for their professional learning within the context that is most meaningful to their teaching. Moreover, if collective reflection is practiced often in a team, teachers can act as sounding boards for informal reflective thoughts throughout the day or for analysing formal written reflections to provide ongoing feedback (McLeod, 2019).

Support for reflection

For student teachers and newly graduated teachers, the ability to engage in critically reflective practice is a skill to be refined over time and with guidance from key mentors. The role of the mentor, peer or associate teacher becomes important in fostering and nurturing the reflective mindsets of those becoming ready to teach. To effectively support reflective practice, the mentor must develop a trusting relationship where the mentee feels safe to be honest about the challenges they face (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Brookfield (1995 as cited in McLeod, 2019) discusses these types of colleagues as 'critical friends'. This informs the role of the mentor as someone who listens, affirms teachers in their beliefs and empowers them in their ability to reflect and grow in professional learning. When teachers know they can feel comfortable being open with mentors, it provides space for mentors to ask open-ended, reflective questions. This approach serves as positive encouragement for those becoming ready to teach, helping them to analyse situations happening in the early childhood environment (Woolston & Dayman, 2022). Additionally, mentors will also feel more comfortable waiting for responses to their questions because they trust that the beginning teacher knows this process is for the benefit of their learning.

Conclusion

To summarise, reflection holds value in beginning teachers' careers because it supports teachers to understand their own values and beliefs, transforms their ways of thinking and helps them to analyse issues or situations they may encounter. Further, reflective practices can also be implemented through a balance of critical reflection, blending both formal written pieces and informal thoughts and conversations. The best reflective practices can come from a place of collaboration within a teaching team and therefore, support from mentors can help cultivate the reflective skills needed that will support the readiness to teach. Teachers need to be mindful that reflection is for the intended purpose of learning

instead of just describing situations. They also need to avoid intellectualising discussions if there is no understanding of how ideas relate to their personal practice. Furthermore, recipe following by rigidly adhering to structured reflection and dealing with time constraints can demotivate teachers' capabilities to reflect regularly. However, a teacher who reflects regularly will see how their practice flourishes, much like a garden when it is well maintained. Kaiako can continue to dig deeply into their practices, planting the seeds of knowledge in order to grow.

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