STUDENT TEACHERS AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS: IS THE PORTFOLIO USE AN APPROPRIATE MEASURE FOR REFLECTIVE SKILLS ACQUISITION?

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Abstract

Over the past two decades there have been significant changes in education particularly driven by social, political, economic and ideological influences. These changes are so complex and place many demands on Higher Education Institutions to ensure educational objectives match the educational needs of society. Reflective practices are important more particularly in the education field because educators bring certain beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, attitudes and values to teaching. Educators are influenced by their social environments which have their own unique characteristics, opportunities and constraints. Therefore, reflective practice requires educators to explore the influence of all these complex factors with the intention of understanding and improving their practice. This study attempted to examine to whether reflective skill development has been encouraged among teacher educators through the compilation or development of teaching portfolios. The motivation to do the study stems from the researchers’ experience when marking the portfolios of students during the teaching practice experience. The researchers found it challenging to get the students reflect in the portfolio at a level necessary for meaning learning. The investigation into the effectiveness of portfolios in developing reflective skills was necessary not only for the university but also for the students. The investigation was undertaken by means of a case study approach within a qualitative research paradigm, as we wanted to interpret and understand the students' experiences in a real-life and specific context. A self-selected sample of 20 students’ written portfolios was used in the study in order to gain in-depth insight into their portfolios as a tool to enhance reflective skills during the teaching practice period. Only the 3rd and final year students (4th years) portfolios were used for the purpose of this study. The findings revealed that the use of portfolios during teaching practice does not fully empower students with reflective skills. Recommendations are made on how portfolios can be improved to enhance reflective practices among students.

Keywords: Teaching portfolio, reflective practices, pre-service educators, teacher training.

1 INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly changing society and economy, teachers more specifically student teachers need to develop reflective skills to prepare them for their expertise as agents of change in their communities. According to Korthagen (2004) and Tateo (2012) reflective skills are important for the discipline of education and to the teachers in general. Kheirzadeh and Sadegh (2018) found in their study positive effects which include the quality of education provided to learners. Reflective thinking involves more than thinking and discussing one's concerns with peers, parents or colleagues about the activities in schools. According to Michell & Weber (1999), reflection in education field involves critical enquiry, being conscious of the ethical implications and consequences of the teaching practice. It is closely related to mega cognition. It includes thorough examination of personal beliefs in relation to learning (Larrivee, 2000). In other words, it requires teachers to think about what they are doing while they are doing it (Schön, 1987). Teachers who are reflective thinkers are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and this helps them to improve in their teaching practice (Ahmed & Al-Khalili, 2013). Hatton and Smith (1995) and Schön (1983) indicated that reflective thinking requires teachers to firstly reflect proactively about what they will be doing in their classrooms prior or during their preparations. This is followed by a reflection whilst teaching and lastly when analyzing what worked and didn’t work during their lessons.

It is a general expectation in education that student teachers to engage in reflective thinking throughout their teaching practice. This is because as individual teachers, we have our own beliefs, assumptions, acquired knowledge and attitudes that we bring to our teaching. Even the society we teach on is not different as it has its own values and culture. In education, portfolios were created to assist students to reflect on their development as student teachers. Reflective teaching requires
teachers to think about their own beliefs and values and the implication they have on their teaching. Therefore, portfolios have been used to assist students to develop a better understanding and appreciation of their learning experience and help them develop insight as to the kind of teachers they would be in future. It has also been used as an assessment tool to evaluate the competencies achieved by students during their teaching practice and as a tool to assist them to reflect on their individual professional development as student teachers (Hartnell-Young et al., 2007; Shepherd & Hannafin, 2011). This involves reflecting on how best they learn and their limitations in relation to their teaching. In the portfolio, students were required to show all their learning activities during the teaching practice (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Students' portfolios are used to identify their areas of expertise and areas in which they need to be developed on (Pintrich, 2004).

The currently used portfolios by students requires them to complete the attendance register reflecting the lessons they have taught in their respective classrooms. They have to complete the lesson observation form where they have to report 2 lessons per major subject which they have observed to be outstanding. It is expected for the students to get involved in the administrative tasks and report on them in their portfolio. This includes reporting on their involvement in their school's extra mural activities. This is followed by reflection form which students are expected to complete where they indicate aspects of their teaching practice experience they find most valuable. It is expected that students to be honest with what they include in the portfolio hence they are also required to have a letter from the school confirming the activities the student was involved in.

An examination of literature reveals a general assumption that portfolios as a tool for reflection can create positive outcomes such as improving the students' awareness of subjective theories, critical thinking skills relation to their teaching method, researching and problem-solving skills (Darling, 2001; Darling-Hammond and Snyder, 2000; Hauge, 2006; Oakley, Pegrum, & Johnston, 2014; Reynolds, 2000; Wade and Yarbrough, 1996). It can help teacher candidates improve their skills and promote professional growth throughout their profession (Robichaux & Guarino, 2012). However, although portfolios are meant to provide a platform for students to reflect on their professional development, the major challenge has been that student teachers are not proficient in doing so. This is in line with the results from several studies which found that student teachers do not routinely reflect on their experiences using portfolios (Lyons, 2006; Meyer & Tusin, 1999; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). What also adds to the challenge is that in certain disciplines within education, reflective thinking is not embedded in the course curriculum.

Therefore, this study attempts to examine whether reflective skill development is being enhanced among student teachers through the compilation or development of teaching portfolios. The motivation to do the study stems from the researchers' experience when marking the portfolios of students during the teaching practice period. The researchers found it challenging to get the students reflect in the portfolio at a level necessary for meaning learning. The investigation into the effectiveness of portfolios in developing reflective skills was necessary not only for the university but also for the students.

2 METHODOLOGY

A case study method was selected as a methodology that would follow whether there are consistencies of trend picked up in the teaching practice of sampled third year teacher trainees' portfolios sampled from 2014 to 2016 cohorts of students in the Further Education and Training programme of a sampled university. A self-selected sample of 20 students' written portfolios was used in the study in order to gain in-depth insight into their portfolios as a tool to enhance reflective skills during the teaching practice period. Only the 3rd and final year students (4th years) portfolios were used for the purpose of this study. The instruments for data collection were parts of teacher trainees' portfolios weekly reflection questionnaires filled in by preservice teachers during teaching practice at Western Cape Education secondary education schools. These reflections were guided by questionnaires provided to teacher trainees for reflection during teaching practice conducted at schools where students were sent for work-integrated learning programme. The reflection questions were specifically created to give participants opportunity to reflect on their practice during their work integrated learning experience in level two and three of Bachelor of Education degree in Further Education and Training school curriculum. All the data collected was analyzed using qualitative methods through developing themes and categories and implications of findings of the study were reported under themes selected. Document analysis was used as a qualitative method (Babbie, and Mouton, 2007; Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2016; Schumacher and McMillan; 2006; Welman, Kruger and Mitchell, 2005).
3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the sample used for this study as well as narrative of researchers, results unveiled a challenge encountered by researchers to get the students critically reflect in the portfolio at a level necessary for meaning learning. This was demonstrated by the majority of portfolios where students rather narrated stories without linking them to their praxis as well as lack of skills to question themselves why certain occurrences took place at school in general and within their teaching spaces even though they recited topics they taught during the week without demonstrating any insight of being critical reflexive thinkers. The investigation into the effectiveness of portfolios in developing reflective skills was necessary not only for the university but also for the students even though it was not adequately used. Perhaps, students needed to be scaffolded into being able to critically reflect on the actions around them and why the act or teach in a manner they do and what are the other possibilities they can explore to improve their practice. The researchers found it challenging to get the students reflect in the portfolio.

It is a common knowledge that the society expects teachers to have high-level cognitive skills which involve knowing how to think in analytical, critical and reflective ways, how to ask questions, make decisions, solve problems, and know how to learn independently. Therefore, it is not surprising that many education institutions have used portfolio development as a favorite tool to develop students as reflective practitioners. Portfolios are also linked to graduate capabilities which include reflective practice to help drive learning towards specified outcomes. Findings of the study suggested a lack of such critical skills needed for envisaged graduates who need to uphold graduate attributes as spelled out in South African policies for teacher education and training, such as developing teachers that are critical reflective thinkers.

Reflective practices are important more particularly in the education field because educators bring certain beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, attitudes and values to teaching. Educators are influenced by their social environments which have their own unique characteristics, opportunities and constraints. Therefore, reflective practice requires educators to explore the influence of all these complex factors with the intention of understanding and improving their practice.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings revealed that the use of portfolios during teaching practice does not fully empower students with reflective skills. In light of the recommendations from policies on Norms and Standards for teacher education (DoE, 2008) as well as policy on Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualification (2015), the above fact unveiled the need to improve the compromised quality and attributes expected to be demonstrated by the envisaged graduates in the Further Education and Training programme of the Bachelor of Education at the university where the case study was conducted. Workshops on reflective essays could precede students’ period of experiential learning and collegial efforts on the teacher educators into assisting students to use reflective instruments could create a breed of educators who is able to reflect on why they do what they do and not only that, but being open to possibilities of improving their practice. The argument holds if students are equipped to be critical reflexive practitioners.

REFERENCES


