

**Peeling the Onion:
Critical Reflection within a Community of Practice:**

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Abstract

Using the theories of critical reflection and community of practice, this paper explores the processes, challenges and professional insights which resulted from a semester-long initiative involving collaborative teaching by four lecturers where the goal was to support the development of pre-service teachers' understanding of parent-professional partnership in the context of engaging with parents of children with additional learning needs. The research methodology embraced a phenomenological approach and the reflective process was documented through individual journaling and community of practice reflection sessions involving the informants. The degree of congruity and incongruity between espoused values and values-in-use was a consistent theme during these reflective sessions. The research findings highlight the commitment required, the stages involved and the challenges which emerged as the researchers endeavoured to establish a safe space where personal backgrounds, beliefs, assumptions, values, experiences and learnings were explored in order to engage as a community of practice, focussing on learning and teaching for transformation, within higher education.

Keywords

Collaborative Portfolio, Community of Practice, Reflection, Teacher Education, Beliefs, Transformative Practice

1. Introduction

Reflective practice is seen as a central tenet of many teacher education programmes around the world (Buschor and Kamm 2015; Horgan and Gardiner-Hyland, 2019; Korthagen 2001; Postholm 2008). However, despite its widespread adoption, many questions have been raised regarding the concept of reflection, the potential it offers and the limitations to be overcome in the context of teacher education (Collin, Karsenti, and Komis 2013; Mena-Marcos, Sanchez, and Tillema 2011). Acknowledging its potential to promote professional learning and to integrate theory and practice, these critiques highlight that there are still many challenges to surmount before reflection can make an optimal contribution to teacher education. One of these challenges involves the need for teacher educators to provide leadership and serve as role models who themselves engage in reflective practice. This paper seeks to address this challenge by reporting on a case study of collaborative reflection which was conducted over the course of one semester involving four teacher educators who collaboratively developed and taught a module which provides undergraduate students in initial teacher education an opportunity to critically examine evidence-based research on parental-professional partnerships in supporting the learning and wellbeing of children with additional needs. In this module, opportunities are provided for students to explore, reflect and critically evaluate their own values, beliefs and assumptions in terms of how they might impact on partnerships with parents of children with additional needs and other professionals. Becoming a reflective teacher is a central theme throughout the module. This paper is based on the reflections of the four teacher educators and who worked collaboratively to design, deliver and reflect on their experiences and challenges as they attempted, through collaboration and critical reflection, to transform their teaching and the learning experiences of their students.

2. Theoretical Framework

Critical reflection within a community of practice formed the theoretical framework for this study. The essence of the concept of reflection in professional practice goes back to the work of Dewey (1933, 1938) who referred to reflection as a form of thought growing from a puzzlement felt in a situation and leading to a search for new information. Dewey maintained that reflective thinking requires continuous evaluation of beliefs, assumptions and hypotheses against existing data and against other plausible

interpretations of the data. Habermas (1971) sought to promote the emancipatory function of knowledge and viewed reflection as having the potential to promote ideals of empowerment and political emancipation where the use of critique and evaluation promotes an outcome that is liberating in its effect. Van Manen (1977) drew on the ideas of Habermas and proposed a hierarchy of reflective thought and practice of which critical reflection was at the pinnacle. According to van Manen (1977), critical reflection, embraces moral and ethical criteria and involves making judgements about whether professional activity is equitable, just, and respectful of persons. In addition, critical reflection locates any analysis of personal action within wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts.

While reflective practice is well-researched (Carr & Kemmis, 1983; Manouchehri, 2002; Burnett & Lingam, 2007), there is a paucity of studies of collaborative reflection involving university faculty (Bell & Mladenovic, 2013, Bentley-Williams, 2017). However, research highlights that it is difficult to uncover our own assumptions when working as solitary individuals (Brookfield, 1998) and that the relationships between individuals happen in situated, cultural activities (Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). It has also been shown that the process of participation and collaboration with others in situated activities and practices promotes social and cognitive development (Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991). Hence, this research study sought to close the gap between espoused theories about the benefits of collaborative critical reflection and the challenges of working collaboratively in higher education.

3. Research Methodology

A phenomenological study concerns the process whereby individuals describe the meaning of their lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell 2007, p. 57). The phenomenon in question was how four teacher-educators experienced collaborative teaching of a module on Parent-Professional Partnership with student teachers in their third and fourth years of the Bachelor of Education Degree. The overarching research question was as follows:

Through reflection, what can we uncover in ourselves and between ourselves about the process of collaborative teaching that might be of value to the community?

The embedded question was:

How can we make it psychologically safe to take risks and challenge each other within the group?

Assuming a phenomenological perspective involves the “intersubjective construction of social reality” (Vaccari, 2018, p. 49) and a sense of “co-beingness” (Caronia, 2011, p. 80). It acknowledges the processes of reflecting on experience to make sense of events while reflecting on events to make sense of experience. To this end, the researchers explored their backgrounds, values, beliefs, assumptions and experiences as both learners and teachers. The researchers perceived lived experiences as conscious experiences (van Manen, 1990) and sought to reduce ‘unconscious incompetence’ in their teaching (Bassott, 2016) through group reflection.

As a means to developing a community of practice, the four lecturers engaged in the development of a collaborative professional portfolio, using the ‘*National Professional Development Framework for All Staff Who Work in Higher Education*’ (National Forum, 2016). The framework is underpinned by a set of identified values: inclusivity, authenticity, scholarship, learner-centredness and collaboration. These values were adopted in setting common goals for the community of practice. The collaborative portfolio set out to document the backgrounds, beliefs, experiences and learnings of the four practitioners who sought to collaboratively design, deliver, assess, evaluate and reflect on a module focussed on parent-professional partnership in the context of the learning needs and wellbeing of children with additional needs. All four authors come from different backgrounds (three have backgrounds in primary teaching and teacher education, one is a health professional with a background in clinical psychology), have different histories, aspirations, influences and inspirations but worked towards a common vision for this module.

Data were gathered on the researchers’ lived experiences of teaching the module in a number of ways. The data set consisted of:

- minutes of planning meetings (MPM)

- module documentation (MD)
- minutes of review meetings (MRM)
- individual reflective journal entries (RJ)
- collective reflective exercises (CRE)

The researchers met twice weekly, after each lecture, for group reflection. Building trust requires vulnerability (Lencioni, 2002), therefore, to be able to function successfully as a 'team', ground rules were established to enable honest reflection. As this study involved the personal reflections of four teacher-educators, it intruded on personal thoughts, experiences and feelings that could be sensitive and/or intimate. However, it was agreed that researchers could elect not to share aspects of their reflective writing with the group and, where the data were being shared with a wider audience, each participant had discretion over what personal information would be shared, thereby reducing harm and risk.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as it offers an accessible and flexible approach to analysing qualitative data (p.77). This involved:

1. Familiarisation with the data: we immersed ourselves in the various data sets by reading and rereading and noting 'initial analytic observations' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.121).
2. Coding: we noted the emergence of initial codes through this analytic process of initial coding.
3. Searching for themes: as 'coherent and meaningful patterns' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.121) emerged from the data, we organised these into themes.
4. Reviewing themes: this process involved the expansion and reduction of emergent themes to tell the story of the data.
5. Defining and naming themes: here we conducted and wrote a detailed analysis of each theme to determine its essence and constructed a meaningful name for each one.
6. Writing up: this stage allowed us to weave the narrative with data extracts in order to present a 'coherent and persuasive story' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 121)

Findings and Discussion:

Beliefs and Personal Philosophy

One of the dominant themes which emerged from the data was the congruence that existed in the espoused belief of the four lecturers regarding the intrinsic dignity of each human being, whether child, parent, student teacher, or teacher educator. This is probably not surprising as the group was formed arising from a shared passion on the part of the researchers. There was a clear resonance between their ideals and guiding beliefs about the value and purpose of education generally and, more particularly, about their work as teacher educators.

My main inspiration comes from a belief in the dignity of each human person and the right of each one of us to feel safe, belong, be cherished and live a 'good' life. (Anne, RJ)

I found resonance with my colleagues on this module in their awareness of and interest in the person-hood of the student teachers. (Kathleen, RJ)

This core belief found expression in a desire to create opportunities for the student teachers to experience dignity in their engagement with the researchers during the module. It also led to the creation of spaces where the student teachers could explore what concepts such as dignity might mean in the context of teaching and interacting with children, particularly, those with additional needs.

Creating such learning spaces requires, I believe, a shared vision, a vision that is firmly rooted in a belief in and profound respect for the dignity and potential of each person. It requires leadership, trust, a passion for education and a belief in the possible. It requires excellence, high standards, high expectations and quality teaching. It requires teachers who are authentic facilitators of learning with a vast array of inclusive instructional strategies, with a genuine concern for the wellbeing and welfare of each student. (Anne, CRE)

Pedagogically, this belief was reflected in an approach to teaching which was dialogical and social constructivist, where student teachers were facilitated to explore the layers, textures and contradictions within their own beliefs and assumptions, and those of others:

We all shared common cause in our desire to open up conversations about the tacit, the hidden, the uncomfortable arena of beliefs, assumptions, perceptions and language (Kathleen, CRE).

Relationships

The theme of relationships is divided into three subthemes: relationships with one another, relationships with students and relationship with self. All relationships grew and deepened over the course of the semester.

Relationships with one another

At the start of this module, the researchers had never worked together as a group, but had each worked with at least one other person on the team. From the outset, they were explicit about the need to model positive co-professional relationships, believing that this is an important skill for student teachers in their future careers. They explored the challenges which might need to be addressed in order to foster a successful collaboration:

Perhaps it's because each person comes to the table with different assumptions about what it is they want to achieve and perhaps, in a group context, there are also differing assumptions by others about what each group member wants to achieve. (Martin, MPM)

As a basic principle of engagement, the researchers agreed to challenge each other's assumptions by developing the practice of asking each other questions in order to clarify meanings in order to build shared understandings. One of the assumptions that emerged for discussion early in the process involved differing perceptions regarding the role of the teacher/lecturer:

It is often comfortable to find sanctuary behind a role or a title, to conform to type – there is safety in that. But in that need for safety, there is also a compromise in not engaging authentically, of not showing up fully. (Kathleen, CRE)

To respect the relationship, it was acknowledged that there was a need to challenge each other's assumptions respectfully and sensitively:

There is the need for caution and care in realising that each person has their own journey of learning and searching to travel, different from mine. (Martin, CRE)

Three of the researchers found that having an ‘outsider’ practitioner working in the group, required a greater level of precision in language use. This was noted by Fionnuala in a personal reflection: “Martin challenged some of the basic educational principles we talked about, those he was not familiar with, and this caused us to become more explicit in our interactions and more reflective.” (Fionnuala, RJ)

The experience of teaching and working together, while challenging at times, was highly valued by the researchers. They were aware that this form of collaboration within a community of practice was a rare phenomenon in higher education and they welcomed the new experiences it provided, particularly regarding collaborative reflection on practice which they found both challenging and rewarding:

I have had the opportunity to practise what I already know and hone my craft more. I have been challenged beyond belief and have had to step out of my comfort zone. (Anne, CRE)

I now see a new way of engaging and a new way of being. At a professional level, I have been inspired by the openness, dedication and commitment of my colleagues, their capacity to share, their openness to learn. (Kathleen, CRE)

Relationship with self

An awareness of the relationship with self arose through the forming of connection and relationship with others and was facilitated by the reflective exercises in which the researchers engaged. “Through this module I’ve learned about myself as a teacher, a teacher-educator, a colleague, a co-professional, a member of the disability community” (Fionnuala, CRE). This collegiality also led Fionnuala developing a greater sense of self-confidence: “I feel an equal and valued member of this community of practice”. This sense of development was felt by all as noted by Anne: “My colleagues have both affirmed and challenged me to grow as a person and a professional” (Anne, CRE).

Relationship with students

The researchers shared a belief that a central aspect to a module on ‘Parent-Professional Partnership’ should be working in partnership with the students. To this end, during the first lecture students were asked to share their expectations for the module. This highlighted a mismatch between the planned curriculum and what the students wanted.

We realised knew that we had to honour the student voice otherwise we would only be paying lip-service to the concept of partnership. This led to RISE (Responding to Initial Student Expectations) where each week the students were given an input at the beginning of class on an area that they wanted to be included in the module.” (Fionnuala, CRE)

In the mid-semester feedback, students commented on the value of this. Other activities to honour the partnership with students included circle time activities at the end of sessions, formal mid- and end-of-semester reviews, and group discussions. As Fionnuala remarked, “students’ needs are changing from week to week and we are doing our best to be adequately responsive” (Fionnuala, MRM).

Safety and Vulnerability

How to create a safe space where ideas could be challenged and teaching could be observed and critiqued by peers, while personal and professional relationships were maintained, emerged as a key theme during the process. The researchers were acutely aware of the importance of this from the outset and established ground rules for mutual engagement. These were founded on the principles of inherent respect for each group member, active listening and a commitment to addressing each issue that emerged between group members.

The theme of vulnerability was a constant throughout the research process. The issue of what is meant by the term ‘vulnerability’ was explored. This exploration enabled each researcher to reflect on and identify personal meanings they ascribed to the term vulnerability. Examples included, ‘uncertainty’, ‘risk’, ‘emotional exposure’ ‘stepping out of comfort zone’ ‘imposter syndrome’, ‘not being respected by other members of the research team’; ‘a fear performing in front of colleagues’; ‘a fear not getting a positive response from the students in the full view of peers’ and ‘a fear of letting go of a need to be in control’.

An example of how vulnerability surfaced in practice is outlined in the following excerpt from Fionnuala's reflective journal which describes her experience of a particular lecture which she felt did not go well:

My excitement and passion for my own research and the general lecture topic clouded my judgement and I ended up speaking too much and providing far too much information. I could see the boredom as students listened and looked as slide after slide flashed across the screen referencing my own research and the work of many other researchers. I was acutely aware of Anne and Martin sitting there and rather than feeling supported, I felt exposed. I would much rather have been doing this lecture with no peer to watch me get it so wrong. At the end of the lecture Martin, Anne and I went back to the staffroom and I really didn't want to talk about it. I felt embarrassed and publicly humiliated. I felt I had exposed myself and shown myself to be incompetent. I was so emotionally fragile, completely vulnerable. I would have been happier to go home to bed and cry for the evening. (Fionnuala, RJ)

As is evidenced by the below quotation, Fionnuala describes how her experience of personal and professional vulnerability was respected and supported by the group. This, and her experience of reflective practice to date, enabled her to acknowledge her feelings of vulnerability.

The experience of the reflective practice to this point was critical for me. I mentally wrestled with how honest I'd be and in that few seconds I knew I could go for broke. We sat down with our teas and coffees and I said "That was a disaster! I'm really embarrassed." The looks told me I had made the right decision in exposing my vulnerability. They both communicated understanding, compassion and empathy in that moment. But rather than tell me I was wrong and it was an excellent lecture they asked why I felt that way and I had to process the lecture professionally as well as emotionally. They were kind and supportive and agreed overall with my judgements but they softened the overly self-critical language I was using and they agreed with the suggestions for improvement. (Fionnuala, RJ)

As the community of practice became more established and a greater sense of trust and safety was felt, the researchers were more open in acknowledging their feelings of vulnerability.

For me personally this was quite difficult at times and I very vulnerable at times, especially at the beginning. This led to much personal development. I needed to use my inner voice to remind myself to be open, to take risks and to challenge opinions. By doing this I also had to remind myself that when someone

challenged my views or disagreed with my opinion it was part of the process. (Fionnuala, CRE)

The benefit of collaborative reflection became evident as the weeks went on. As Brookfield (1998) reminds us, it is challenging in practice to 'hunt' one's own assumptions as a solitary endeavour as it is difficult not to engage one's existing assumptions in the process:

I couldn't have found this resolution alone, but I can do it through the collaborative paradigm of this module. Our reflections as a team mean I can be questioned, challenged, gently probed to go deeper and I find I go there with greater ease, with greater comfort and without a sense of trepidation. I have learned to value the vulnerable and see it as my strength. It has influenced my teaching in other areas and has prompted deep critical reflection in those areas too. (Anne, CRE)

We invited one another to move towards the edge of our psychological comfort zones, then to venture further, trusting in our shared commitment to both support and challenge one another. My sense is that our respective decisions to venture further has been deeply personal for each of us. For me it has been the road less travelled, an unspoken but deeply felt search for belonging, connection and inter-dependence. This has made all the difference! (Martin, CRE)

3. Conclusions and Future Work

This research sought to document and explore reflectively the opportunities, challenges and ultimate learnings which resulted from the experiences of four teacher educators who worked as a community of practice to design, deliver and critically reflect on their experiences of engaging with students in the context of a module on Parent Professional Partnership for children with additional needs.

The phenomenological approach to the analysis of the experiences and reflections of the four participant researchers highlighted how differing individual expectations (deriving from latent values, assumptions and beliefs) regarding roles, responsibilities and relationships impacted on the process of creating and sustaining a community of practice. The results highlight the personal and professional learnings that accrued from the process in terms of exploration of beliefs and personal philosophies of learning and teaching; deepening of relationships with each other, with students and

with self; and how to create safe spaces where participants can express and acknowledge their vulnerability.

The findings reveal that the researchers experienced, in broad terms, the stages in the Critical Reflection Process outlined by Larrivee (2000), notably the *examination stage* (questioning whether a particular action, reaction, or interaction is achieving what is desired); *challenging* current practice, beliefs and assumptions; *desire for change, struggle* (often involving fear, doubt and vulnerability); and ultimately *transformation* (involving changes in perspective and a shift in dominant ways of thinking). In the case of the participants in this study, the process of transformation involved greater feelings of self-efficacy and confidence.

However, there were many challenges and obstacles to be surmounted in endeavouring to work as a community of practice using a critically reflective paradigm within higher education. At a practical level, this process made considerable demands on the participants in terms of their time. In addition to their individual preparation and teaching on the module, the group engaged in six hours of collaborative planning prior to the commencement of the module. Weekly two-hour review and reflection meetings took place during each of the twelve weeks of the semester. On completion of the module, the group devoted one full day to review, process and evaluate the experience. In addition to this, two of the four lecturers engaged in the module voluntarily as there was no system within the HEI to accredit lecturing hours delivered collaboratively within a community of practice model such as this.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. This was a small-scale research study and a larger sample could yield further insights, both confirming and contrarian, into the findings of this research (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2016). Furthermore, this study explored the views of four teacher educators over one semester. A longer study could yield further insights into the potential of critical reflection within a community of practice to change the perspectives, beliefs, assumptions and pedagogies of higher education faculty.

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