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The Use of Reflective Journals in Professional Development

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***Abstract*---**Much of the education literature places improving teacher professionalism at the context of any educational improvement. Researchers in education have built their arguments on the assumptions that increasing student performance requires fostering professional growth for teachers. A key aspect of a teacher's applying learning in an authentic professional development context is reflection. Analysis of reflective journals also shows how student teachers grew and interacted with others in the learning community. So it's no wonder that professional developers have implemented many Professional Development programs in their effort to bring out positive change in education and improvement. Undoubtedly, the success of any professional development effort largely depends on the readiness and willingness of the teachers. In this article, I argue that based on such a premise and approach professional development will hardly yield any positive results. Drawing on existing literature, the concept of teachers as reflective practitioners will be incorporated into the theme to encourage them to incorporate reflection into daily teaching practices. By doing so, teachers will adopt an autonomous approach to professional development that makes it easier for them to participate in the lifelong learning process.

***Keywords*---**autonomous approach, education literature, professional development, reflection, reflective journals.

Introduction

Effective practices in most professional disciplines require the integration of theory, skill application, logical insight, and attitudes, philosophies, and attitudes that are unique to each practitioner (Corey et al., 1998). Furthermore, one of the goals of higher education is to develop professionals who are capable of self-

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reflection and analysis (Berger & Youkeles, 2000; Corey et al., 1998). A reflective journal is a teaching tool that can help professionals in developing these necessary skills (Stickel & Waltman, 1994). In addition, Dyment & O'Connell (2007), address the potential of journal writing as a means for creating a valuable link between lifelong learning and sustainability. Thus, reflective journals can serve as a means to enhance the understanding of course content, a strategy for creating meaning, and a method to clarify and critique student understanding.

Professional development (PD) and teacher learning are highly researched topics (Killion & Harrison, 2017; Kastens & Manduca, 2017). It is defined as a series of activities aimed at "improving teachers' skills, their knowledge and understanding and their effectiveness" (Hampton et al., 2004). This is an ongoing process, nurtured over time with additional professional development investment so that teachers update their skills thus maintaining a certain level of professionalism. This concept, i.e., dedicated learning time to refine and perfect their crafts, looks different globally (McComb & Eather, 2017).

Based upon these ideas, this article discusses the potential of reflection, especially reflective journals, to provide not only professional development but also learning and teaching that is consistent with higher education. The next section in the paper reviews the literature supporting the pedagogical use of reflective journals and explains its use in professional education. The paper also argues that participatory approaches to PD provide autonomy, thereby enabling teachers to explore their own approaches to context responses. While I don't think written journals are the most ideal method of reflection, in my own research they have proven to be a practical, feasible, and theoretically sound approach. Although this article explains the use of reflective journaling in PD human services education, the basic principles of reflection apply equally to almost all other disciplines and courses that require introspective writing (Cengiz et al., 2014; Epp, 2008; Lefebure, 2019; Mantra, 2017).

Review Literature

At times, teachers may ask students to refer to theories or contents in their journal writings by associating personal experiences and their observations with course content. Both teachers and students can use reflective journals to analyze students' understanding of course material and students' introspection. When using reflective journaling, Hubbs & Brand (2007), showed that there is little agreement in human services educators on the instructional purpose of journal writing or how to interpret information in student journals. In an online survey using reflective journals in master's and doctoral programs of counselor educators, more than 2/3rd of 272 respondents (69%), in which 128 were men and 140 were women reported reflective journal is designated in the classroom. The results show that counselor educators, like professionals assign reflective journals for a number of purposes, including examining the counselor students' perceptions and their understanding of course content, attitudes, personal growth, and professional development.

Definitions of reflection

Reflection may be defined as a mental process in which people think about things by looking back on them. Reflection includes psychological responses to perceived problems and inconsistencies, as well as a willingness to challenge the beliefs, values, and assumptions held by the individual. Reflection has been recognized as an essential part of adult and professional education and plays a central role in learning and action research (Schon, 1984).

Reflection can be explained in many forms of learning and teaching. It may be individual or group activity; formative, summative or cumulative; shared, introspective; oral or written; assessed or un-assessed (Falchikov & Boud, 1989). Reflection not only provides scope for collecting research data but also facilitates and assesses learning in many ways that prove to be useful for PD. Dewey (1986), makes a clear explanation between reflective action and routine action. He says that routine action is a non-reflective action guided by traditions and established as standard norms within the school community. Teachers who lack reflection never try new perspectives to try other options because they have become accustomed to seeing these options as ones that really pose dire risks; they must therefore be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, reflective action involves the careful consideration of any idea, or practice in terms of the reasons that support it (Zeichner & Liston, 2013).

Barriers and traditional model in professional development

Many barriers are responsible for making professional development effective. Finding available time for professional development before, during, or after class is usually determined in consultation between leadership and the faculty union. Therefore, both leaders and teachers must prioritize PD practices and opportunities over other initiatives and commitments (Mizell, 2012). The lack of impactful professional development is a major concern for parents, educators, and governments, especially in rural communities in developing countries. Existing centrally mandated PD programs utilizing off-site training methods appear to be insufficient to impact teachers' performance. Procedures are fixed and rigid due to reluctance and unresponsive to changing circumstances of teachers. Existing projects are non-participatory, excluding relevant stakeholders. This context-insensitive and non-engaged approach fails to support teachers in enhancing their professional development (Vangrieken et al., 2017). Much of the literature suggests that professional development programs for existing teachers are not sufficient to enable them to develop local curricula(i.e. school-based), implement them effectively, and create a rich learning environment in a school (Dhungana et al., 2021).

For supporting teachers during their long and exhausting careers, a variety of Professional Development (PD) opportunities are available to improve their teaching practices and quality. However, these opportunities follow a top-down approach traditionally and take the form of traditional PD such as; short courses, seminars, and webinars (Wyatt & Ončevska Ager, 2017). Webinars provide a way to remotely access PD opportunities. Teachers can view topics created by professional learning experts, or leaders can also assign topics to improve their

practice. This type of PD is suitable for educators to enhance their practice for their own convenience (Ingvarson et al., 2005). In this approach, PD is seen as "what others do for, or for teachers" (Johnson, 2009). The transformation of the current PD requires modification in form and content to make teacher development more targeted, intentional and sustainable (TANIŞ & Dikilitaş, 2018).

Shift towards reflective practioner

Opportunities for professional development are generally available to both teachers and school leaders. This must be seen as an opportunity to improve the practice of professionals; however, PD courses often resemble compliance activities with little support from teachers (Cooc & Kiru, 2018). Borg (2015), asserts that educators are actively thinking decision-makers who primarily shape classroom activities because they have the best understanding of the true teaching environment. Furthermore, these events often take the form of workshops in determining the content of these events (Korkmazgil, 2015). The Learning Forward (2011) organization has established 7 professional learning standards for teachers to use when planning and delivering PD. The criteria for professional learning are learning communities, leadership, resources, and data, learning design, implementations, and their outcomes (Killion & Crow, 2011). Educators need PD whenever practices and expectations change (Hirsh & Segolsson, 2019). Extensive research over the past 20 years has confirmed the close relationship and correlation between student learning and teacher practice. Similar research also shows that professional learning has positive impacts on teacher practice (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Following Dewey's (1986), work on reflective thinking and Schon's (1984), elaboration, there has been a resurgence in the reflective practices in education (Farrell, 2012), where teachers collect "data about their teaching", examine their attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and teaching practices, and use the information obtained as a base for critical reflection on teaching" (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). This movement builds a sense of ownership and responsibility among teachers for their own teaching practices and sees teacher reflection as an avital forum for the professional development of teachers (Johnson, 2009).

The conceptual framework for professional development

Schon (1984), distinguishes between two types of reflective thinking: one is a reflection in action and the other reflection on action. He believes that reflection in action involves a tacit thought process in constant interaction with ongoing practices. This interaction ultimately leads practitioners to revise and refine their practice. For reflection on action, it involves "systematic and thoughtful reflection on one's actions" (Leitch & Day, 2000). This type of reflection is often undertaken to better understand and improve the teaching practice. Keeping a reflective journal is a great way to complete the reflective action process. The core of professional art revolves around these two types of reflection in which reflective practitioners are engaged (Leitch & Day, 2000). Louden (1992), developed a conceptual framework that includes two dimensions for reflections: interest and form, which ultimately form a matrix structure. This idea is rejected that knowledge is a product of pure intellectual action. The theory of "knowledge

constitutes interest" is so called because of his firm belief that knowledge is always based on interests that develop from the natural needs of human beings (Carr & Kemmis, 2003).

There are major two policy gaps for the professional development of teachers. First, PD policies for teachers encourage schools and teachers to independently develop PD programs using existing resources (NCED, 2016). Niraula (2018), argues that the incompetence of principals is the root cause of this gap in policy practice for a number of reasons. Unfortunately, no studies are looking for the reasons behind the incompetence. Second, while the curriculum development and professional development plan propose a participatory approach that enables teachers to develop curriculum; teachers cannot develop school-based curriculum in practice (NCED, 2016). These exclusions of teachers while creating curricula may be a problem that can be addressed through democratic and inclusive participatory processes (Kemmis, 2008). Perhaps this exclusion is labeled"technological interest", which can be understood as a disempowering method of controlling human agency in constructing knowledge (Grundy, 1987). It is evident from the available literature that teachers can solve immediate problems, but they cannot develop their own methods to solve current and future problems. Additionally, teachers will continue to seek support from others and experiment with new approaches that may or may not enhance their agency. By thinking alternative approaches, teachers can continually explore context-based approaches, develop their own PD framework, and influence self, and others, rather than relying on others (Niraula, 2018).

Possible interventions in my context

In my context, almost all the professional development programs are designed and implemented to deal with the technical form of teacher's knowledge. These programs adhere to a technically rational approach to PD, in the form of seminars, workshops or, conferences, and premise on insufficient teacher's knowledge and skills (Hoban et al., 1997). Sadly, no analysis is done to determine the professional requirements of teachers before any PD program is implemented. So, PD activities are most of the time "a random and unrelated set of activities with no clear directions" (Guskey & Sparks, 2004). Furthermore, since these PD courses are strongly associated with weaknesses in teacher performance, participants' enthusiasm for active participation is diminished in most cases (Clark & LaLonde,1992).

Sadly, taking teachers toward autonomous PD seems like a daunting task in my context, considering many factors. First, most of the teachers in our environment are expatriates. They left their home country in the hope of finding better job opportunities (Marx et al., 1998; King, 2002; Freese, 1999; Ruan, 2018). As a result, they are more eager towards earning a living than find ways to improve their professional development. Arguing this further, we can say that no school-based PD program can help teachers develop into professionals. Finally, the teacher classification scheme is hierarchical in nature. The efficacy of teachers is based upon false assumptions that secondary school teachers perform much better academically than prep and primary school teachers. So it's no surprise

that vertical collaboration across different grades and tiers never happened (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Gaudin & Chaliès, 2015).

In any environment, where teachers are portrayed and treated negatively, and professional development focuses on their weaknesses rather than their abilities and strengths, their own growth will stall and their enthusiasm for achieving better levels of performance will be dulled. Furthermore, when PD does not meet the unique requirements of teachers, it does little to help them improve their teaching abilities. Also, when teachers are not motivated to reflect on their teaching practices to better understand and gain insight into the learning or teaching process, they will just go through the motions (Gabriel, 2011), with no real impact on student achievement. So, implementing any teacher PD program will rarely yield any positive results. This is not to say that I am pessimistic about any future academic progress, but it looks like we are in the wrong direction and thus find ourselves in the dark. What we need is a path that allows us to see where we are going and supports us when we stumble on our way (Saltrick, 1998).

Keeping a reflective journal for PD

The major reason for keeping a reflective journal is that writing is a type of reflection, and reflection in practice is a healthy professional practice that enhances meaningful learning and increases the effectiveness of teachers. In teaching journals, teachers write about their experiences in an effort to analyze patterns and insights into their teaching practice (Körkkö et al., 2016; Egorychev et al., 2021; Avalos, 2011). In order for teachers to achieve the desired goal of keeping a reflective journal, the latter needs to be checked and analyzed from time to time to understand recurring patterns of events. I think that mental reflection has many lacking because it cannot be explored over time. In my case, most teachers don't use reflective journals. This may be because they feel that writing down their practice will add an additional duty to their teaching loads. They won't be motivated to keep one until we make them realize the true value of keeping a reflective journal.

Conclusion

Developing knowledge and skills involves implicit internal procedures that are most difficult for teachers to identify and measure. Therefore, teachers may ask students to journal lessons, experiences, personal values or beliefs. However, the available literature on reflective journaling suggests that unless teachers guide the reflective processes in a meaningful way, students often see journaling as busywork. Professional development is considered an effective work initiative; therefore, it remains crucial for teachers to research PD practices and publish their works. Leaders should have a PD framework with set standards that can be used to plan, build and facilitate meaningful meetings. Without effective PD, teachers have an excuse to execute programs that do not meet the fidelity expectations of higher education. There is a gap between the existing literature on PD best practices and their implementation. Since educational improvements can only be achieved when teachers develop professionally; it seems to me that education leaders should plan teacher education ways by investing in PD

programs. If carefully designed and modified to the learning needs of students and teachers, these professional development courses are sure to lead to educational improvements as they are closely related to the practice in a specific context (Kolb, 1984; Thahir et al., 2021; Widana et al., 2020).

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