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Reflective practice is one of the concepts that the Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, Eastern Africa values as essential for teacher learning and development. It is incorporated in the Certificate in Education Programmes that target practising primary teachers. Emphasis is given to journal writing as an approach to reflective practice. However, many teachers seem to find it challenging to sustain this approach. This was a small-scale study which was conducted in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, to investigate why this might be the case. It is a qualitative study of a hermeneutic phenomenological nature. Semi-structured interviews were the sole method of data collection. The Miles and Huberman approach of qualitative data analysis was utilised. Findings indicated that teachers encounter a number of challenges that inhibit them from reflecting through journaling. These range from lack of time, the structure of the programmes and the way reflective practice is introduced to them, to teacher motivation and lack of structures to support the practice.

Keywords: reflective practice; journal writing; Certificate in Education Programmes (CEPs)

Introduction

The Aga Khan University-Institute for Educational Development, Eastern Africa (AKU-IED, EA) designs and conducts a variety of professional development programmes for practising teachers. In this study, I focus on the school-based six-months-long Certificate in Education Programmes (CEPs). In these programmes, reflective practice is one of the concepts that teachers are introduced to. The aim is to empower them to have ownership of their own professional development and improve their, particularly classroom, practices.

We encourage the use of journals to ensure that teachers are actively engaged in the reflecting process. To maximise learning the teachers' journal entries are read and responded to by facilitators during the period of the CEPs. It is envisaged that these experiences may enable teachers to become active reflective practitioners, particularly after the completion of the programmes.

However, informal evidence collected over years of the programme being offered suggests that sustainability of reflective practice through journal writing is a big challenge for teachers. Only few continue to sketchily maintain their journals, and for only short periods. Shariff and Otienoh (2003) confirm this: 'CPs [course participants] do not maintain their journals after the programmes' (p. 328). This small-scale study

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sought to understand more about why teachers find it challenging to reflect through journal writing after completion of the CEPs.

Background of the study

The CEPs

The aim of AKU-IED, EA is to contribute to the provision of quality education in the East African region. We therefore conduct several teacher education programmes in the region including the CEPs. The ultimate goal of conducting these programmes is to create a critical mass of teachers in schools who are able to work collaboratively with colleagues in order to bring about whole-school improvement. Therefore, the programmes aim at improving teachers' content knowledge, while also introducing them to non-traditional teaching and learning methodologies, curriculum development, reflective practice and relevant current educational issues.

A fundamental tenet of the programmes is the effort made to integrate theory with sound classroom practices. Thus, a large component of the programmes is school based, in the teachers' actual classrooms. This enables them to try out the new teaching and learning approaches and methodologies which they have learnt and reflect on their experiences. Hence reflective practice is one aspect of the programmes that is emphasised. For these programmes to be meaningful and relevant to teachers the local curriculum and real-life issues in schools are considered.

Structure of CEPs

Each of the programmes comprises three phases. Phase one and three are three-weeks-long, face-to-face sessions conducted during school holidays. Teachers are exposed to theoretical aspects of identified content and progressive teaching and learning methodologies.

Phase two is a three to four months-long practicum depending on school contexts and duration of their school terms. During this time, teachers try to implement their new learning in their classrooms as facilitators visit to observe and support them. This support is in the form of concrete feedback about their teaching. It is hoped that this might enable them to improve and sustain the new teaching and learning strategies, in their classrooms.

Reflective practice in the CEPs

One of the objectives of the CEPs is to enable teachers to have ownership of their professional development, hence to be able to learn and grow from their own practice particularly after the completion of the programmes. We therefore introduce the concept of reflective practice for this purpose. Apart from teachers being theoretically introduced to this concept, they have hands-on experience of reflecting through journals.

It is expected that during phases one and three (the face-to-face sessions), teachers reflect on the proceedings of the sessions, particularly how meaningful and useful the learning is to their practice. Time is allotted for this activity towards the end of each day. However, during the practicum, and after the completion of the programmes, teachers are expected to reflect on their experiences of implementing their learning in their classrooms, for improvement of the teaching and learning process.

To enable teachers to conceptualise the complex process of journal writing, they go through a rigorous experience. They are expected to journal daily. It is expected that when writing, teachers identify a critical incident, describe it and critically analyse its implications in relation to their practice – an indication of deeper analytical reflections. Facilitators then read teachers' journal entries and give feedback. This is to help them improve the quality of their journaling, by having deeper critical analytical reflections as described above, instead of describing issues and events. This feedback is in the form of comments, questions and remarks written, in most cases, within the text of the entries, for the teachers to easily relate them to the content of their entries. In addition, general remarks are written at the end of each entry pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the entries, and which areas need to be improved upon. At times, teachers are also required to share their reflections and feedback given from both facilitators and their colleagues with the rest of the class.

Reflective practice, journal writing and teachers

Though reflective practice is well known and recognised internationally as a powerful tool for teacher professional development, it is relatively unknown in Tanzania, the context of this study. Few studies have been carried out in relation to this practice and it is nearly impossible to find any literature in this area. However, there are studies of teaching and particularly of poor teacher preparation and qualifications leading to poor classroom practices and lack of professional ethics (Davidson, 2005; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2004; Woods, 2007). This might be an indication that teachers in Tanzania are not exposed to the concept of reflective practice during their training and therefore hardly engage in it.

Studies carried out elsewhere show that many teachers are unable to sustain the practice of reflection through journal writing. A survey carried out by Holly and McLoughlin (1989) reveals, consistent with our experience, that although a few teachers continued to write reflections after a year, most did not sustain it throughout the year.

One of the challenges often cited by teachers is lack of time. Holly and McLoughlin (1989) concur and they argue that although many educators pay lip service to reflective practice, little actual time is spent on it. As a teacher educator, I have noted that head teachers in this context fail to provide time for teachers to reflect. I attribute this largely to their ignorance of the practice. As Farrell (2004) points out: 'It would be wonderful if administrators recognised the need for teachers to reflect on their work by freeing up some time for that purpose, but unfortunately, that is not the present reality' (p. 1).

It would be naïve however, to suggest that time is the only requirement for journal writing. Davis (2003) argues that motivation could be more important than any other factor. And there is some evidence that teacher motivation is a major issue in Tanzania. As Davis aptly states, and consistent with my experiences as a high school teacher and teacher educator: 'This de-motivation occurs because of lack of resources, lack of recognition, overwork, and lack of appreciation of the additional burdens put on academics' (p. 243). And Woods (2007) adds poor remuneration. Davis further argues that as long as teachers remain de-motivated, they still may not carry out journaling even with time allotted for it.

Moon and Boullon (1997) attributed some of teachers' reluctance to reflect to lack of experience in reflective thinking. They argue that some teachers' prior experience

of training courses, whether of the 'tips for teachers' variety, where they take part in quick demonstrations of a number of activities or techniques, or of the 'received knowledge' type, where they listen to lectures in which a tutor delivers theory to them in the form of principles to be applied, does not require them to engage in active thinking about teaching nor to question their practices and beliefs. (And from my experience as a student of education, and listener to teachers' sentiments about their initial training, the latter form of training is perhaps common in this context.) Teachers from such learning environments may experience frustration, disorientation and conflict when confronted with a reflective approach. Indeed my experience of facilitating CEPs shows that many such teachers find it difficult to move from descriptions of events to analysis when reflecting. Hence, they are 'unlikely to see the relevance of time spent on reflection and may perceive it as a waste of time' (Moon & Boullon, 1997, p. 70).

The process of reflection requires the use of higher level metacognitive skills (Calderhead, 1988, in Moon & Boullon, 1997), which take time and need appropriate opportunities to be developed (Hatton & Smith, 1995; McNamara, 1990, in Moon & Boullon, 1997). Thus, a relatively 'short, one-off, in-service course [like our CEPs] is unlikely to provide enough time or sufficient opportunity to develop reflective thinking, if teachers are not already familiar with such approaches' (Moon & Boullon, 1997, p. 70). And these teachers are unlikely to sustain the practice.

Research question

Why do CEP graduate teachers in Dar-es-Salaam find it challenging to sustain reflective practice through journal writing after the completion of the programmes?

Methodology

Research design

This was a small-scale qualitative study which explored why teachers find it challenging to sustain the practice of reflecting through journal writing. In line with Geertz (11973) in Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I employ phenomenological methodology to gain entry into the teachers' conceptual world of reflection and what meaning they construct around the activity and experiences of journaling. My role as a researcher is to understand, and make sense of, teachers' experiences and construct meaning out of them (Usher, 1996).

Consequently, there is a 'double hermeneutic at work' (Usher, 1996, p. 20) since teachers interpret their reflective practice experiences while I attempt to interpret the same to answer my research question.

Sample and sampling procedure

This study involved only three teachers. The sampling was purposeful since I wanted to gauge whether gender, teachers' school level of teaching (primary or secondary), and time spent in the field after the completion of the programmes impacted on their experiences of journaling.

The sample comprised two male primary school teachers, and one female secondary school teacher. The male participants attended CEPs in 2004 and 2005, and the

female participant attended in 2006. I was the facilitator (course leader) for all three programmes. Hence, I was familiar with the participants. Brief biographies of the three teachers and their school contexts are provided later in this paper.

Data collection and analysis methods

Semi-structured interviews

In this study, I attempted to explore teachers' experiences of journal writing, and infer why they find it challenging. This involved discussions, expressions, interpretations and meaning making (Brenner, 2006; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2006) in relation to participants' perceptions of the CEPs, teaching as a profession, their schools' cultures, and how these impact on their journaling experiences. Therefore I used semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1 for interview guide) for this purpose. These allowed me to explore teachers' experiences of journal writing, both during and after the CEPs, in terms of their knowledge, information, values, preferences, attitudes and beliefs (Tuckman, 1972, in Cohen et al., 2006). I audio-recorded all the interviews.

Analysis and interpretation of data

Data analysis was on-going and was carried out concurrently with data collection (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Wallen & Fraenkel, 2001; Walliman, 2006). 'The interplay between data collection and analysis produced a gradual growth of understanding [of the data collected]' (Walliman, 2006, p. 129). Therefore, I was able to understand the themes that emerged, and gauge whether the research question was being addressed (p. 129).

I used the Miles and Huberman approach (Punch, 2005; Robson, 2002) of analysing qualitative data, which involves the essential activities of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification (Robson, 2000; Walliman, 2006). Data reduction was done using coding and writing of memos during data collection (Robson, 2002). I used descriptive codes to sort data, to separate materials bearing on a given topic (theme) from other data (Punch, 2005).

Ethical considerations

Confidentiality and anonymity

I explained to the participants that any information given would be treated with confidentiality and that I would be the only person to access it. I assured them that, as stipulated in the consent form, I would conceal their identities by using pseudonyms in my assignment report. Moreover, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, I personally carried out the interviews and transcribed the recorded tapes.

Informed consent

For purposes of informed consent, I disclosed the purpose, aims and the study questions. I also presented the Aga Khan University research consent form (Appendix 2) and went through it with each of the participants to ensure that they understood what it entailed and the implications of participating in my study.

To ensure that they did not feel pressured and obliged to participate in the study, I gave them 24 hours to think about it. I emphasised that they were at liberty not to consent if they felt the study would inconvenience them in any way.

The sample teachers and their school contexts

Male teacher A (Muttoni)

At the time of the study, this teacher had taught for 12 years in various private primary schools in Dar-es-Salaam. He was then a deputy head teacher in his current school in which he had taught for slightly over a year. His duties included classroom teaching, being in charge of monitoring teaching, learning and students' performance and discipline. However, his teaching load was slightly less than that of the other teachers due to his administrative duties.

This teacher believed that teachers should make an effort to continuously learn and update themselves with current educational practices and issues, particularly current teaching and learning approaches. This explains his desire to attend the CEP.

Muttoni's school was a community school, run by a board of trustees mostly drawn from the community. Most of the teachers were also from the same community, except Muttoni and a few others. This is purposely done so that the school remains a tool of propagating the community's cultural norms, traditions and morals.

Unlike government primary schools which have Kiswahili as the medium of instruction, Muttoni's school is an English-medium school. It means that though it offers the local curriculum which is mostly in Kiswahili, the teaching and learning takes place in English. These sorts of schools have emerged due to the need of some parents to have their children learn and become proficient in the English language.

This school has extended learning hours unlike government schools. The school day ends at 3.30 pm instead of the usual government policy of 2.00 pm.

Male teacher B (Midaussi)

This teacher was teaching in a primary government (public) school at the time of the study. He had taught for 24 years. He was a class teacher of grade five. He chose to attend the CEP because he expected to update his teaching methods.

Like any other public school in Tanzania, the issues of large classes were very prevalent in this school. His class had 95 children. Due to the large number of children accessing education since the declaration of Free Primary Education, the school like most government primary schools has two shifts, the morning and the afternoon shift. The morning shift begins at 7.30 am and ends at 12.30 pm. The afternoon one begins at 1.00 pm and ends at 5.30 pm.

Female teacher C (Sumatta)

Sumatta had been teaching for 23 years at the time this study was carried out. She was a government secondary school teacher of English. Her main objective of attending the CEP was her interest in learning and acquiring new knowledge and skills in terms of teaching strategies.

Her school was co-educational and relatively new. It had been in existence for only two years. It had a population of about 300 students. This was one of the schools that were constructed to increase the number of secondary schools in Tanzania. Unlike primary schools in Tanzania, which are Kiswahili-medium schools, secondary education is conducted in English.

The school day runs from 8.00 am to 3.30 pm. Teachers are therefore expected to be in school throughout the day whether they are involved in active teaching or not. It is expected that they stay to deal with other issues related to teaching and learning and other school matters.

Findings

Challenges in sustaining journaling faced by teachers

Lack of time for reflections

The issue of heavy school workloads and hence lack of time was very prominent as a challenge to journaling. Muttoni said:

> But if we were to get really factual, if we were to look at the real daily running routines of the school … working on a reflection could be really hard. At times you could totally run out of working on your journal because of the school has its own programmes, you have got workloads … to clear at the end of the day.

Reiterating the above but emphasising lack of time, Sumatta said she does not 'journal'

> … because of time, nothing else. I like the practice, but time, only time. [If] I can gener-alise according to the situation around here (gesturing around the school), I think it only time, it is only time. We have a lot of things to do. We are few but have a lot of things to do.

Midaussi attributed teachers' inability to write reflections to the large classes they teach: 'we neglected writing reflections because we are so busy with large classes … when it comes to 2.00 pm [end of school day], you are exhausted, you are tired, you just want to go home.'

Short time span for CEP

Muttoni claimed that teachers find it difficult to journal because the duration of the CEPs is too short for them to fully understand the process of reflecting:

> What could be lacking [in the CEP] is just the time span … Because this is something [reflective practice] that many of the teachers have been introduced to for the first time. It is a new aspect in their teaching profession … It is something that this person [teacher] doesn't know, this person … considers it as a stumbling block … because he doesn't really know how to work it out.

Could Muttoni's use of the words 'stumbling block' in the above quotation perhaps be an indication that teachers find the practice of reflection bothersome? Could this be therefore the reason for teachers' lack of understanding of this concept?

Impact of facilitators' feedback on journal entries

The feedback given by facilitators on course participants' journal entries seemed to have discouraged the participants as suggested by Muttoni: 'There were times comments were put down and we felt like maybe what we were doing is totally unexpected … .'

   Muttoni seems to be referring to the way the comments, questions and remarks are written in teachers' journal entries. Sometimes they may be too overwhelming resulting in the above feelings. These comments would have perhaps contributed to teachers developing a negative attitude to journaling. However, though Sumatta said she found the feedback very encouraging, she too still did not write her reflections after completing the CEP.

No tangible product from reflecting

Midaussi noted that reflecting through writing journals does not result in any tangible product for teachers. Reflecting to improve practice is not perceived as such: 'We reflect, reflect until when? But if you have a target that after reflection maybe I will write a book, or write advice for my colleagues, then of course you will keep on writing reflections.'

   It is clear that Midaussi does not perceive any value in reflecting.

Lack of supportive structures

Midaussi felt that there is a need for structures to be put in place to 'push' teachers to reflect – whether this be through encouragement or being 'forced' as is done with lesson plans and schemes of work. This would work better if head teachers were involved:

> There is no what you call encouragement from outside … You know there must be some forces, something to force you to do so. If head teachers were taken to this course, they would have to force us to write reflection. But even the head teachers do not understand about reflection. Therefore they only insist on lesson plan, schemes of work, and etc. and maybe teaching aids, but not on reflection. If there is somebody who is coming to encourage or force you somehow, then you will be doing it daily.

   However, the aspect of 'forcing' teachers to reflect would imply that they would mechanically journal to simply fulfil a requirement, as it is with lesson plans and schemes of work. Hence, journaling will not serve its purpose of enabling teachers to learn from their practice and grow professionally.

Perception of the teaching profession

Midaussi suggested that society's perception of the profession contributes to teachers' low morale; therefore, this perhaps discourages teachers from engaging in any beneficial professional activity: 'Teaching in Tanzania is taken as a very low profession. We are judged as not very important people.' This perception perhaps discourages teachers from putting much effort into the teaching profession, which perhaps impacts on journal writing.

Moreover, according to Midaussi, teachers themselves do not hold teaching in very high esteem; they do not think of it as a worthwhile profession. He said: 'They [teachers] take teaching not as a profession.' He used an analogy to describe this attitude:

> We take teaching like a farmer; many farmers would not do any research they just take their hoe and go to dig. They don't think why this year my harvest is not good? Why last year we were the best? They don't think. They simply think of rain, and dry season. That is the same with we teachers. We only think about money in your pocket. We don't take it as a profession whereby we can take one pupil who has got a problem, sit down, discussing his/her problem and try to think how would you solve this problem? They don't think, they don't try to do so. They simply take things easy, easy, easy.

Midaussi seems to be suggesting that teachers go through the motions of teaching mechanically. This would perhaps make reflecting through journal writing, which is a conscious purposeful activity, challenging.

Discussion and recommendations

From this small-scale study, it seems apparent that teachers find reflecting through journaling a big challenge. Teachers in the study give a number of reasons for why this is the case. However, certain issues raised by teachers could be a 'stepping stone' to re-thinking, hence re-designing, the approach we take to introducing reflective practice to teachers, hence resulting in its sustainability.

Structure of CEP

The duration of the CEP, cited by one teacher, seems to be a hindrance to adequate understanding of the concept of reflective practice and the process of reflecting which can result in sustained journaling. Teachers find the face-to-face duration (one and a half months) of the programmes too short a time for them to concretely understand the concept and process of reflective practice. This could be because, as argued by Calderhead (1988, in Moon & Boullon, 1997), the process of reflective practice requires the use of a high level of metacognitive skills. Therefore it takes time and needs appropriate opportunities to be developed (Hatton & Smith, 1995; McNamara, 1990, in Moon & Boullon, 1997).

In this regard, we at AKU-IED, EA should perhaps consider other issues like teachers' academic and professional qualifications, and ask ourselves whether the time we spend teaching the concept of reflective practice is adequate to enable teachers to understand and develop journaling skills to sustain the activity of journal writing.

Moreover, the approach taken by facilitators of reading and giving feedback on teachers' journal entries came under scrutiny. Though this is done to encourage teachers to journal while enabling them to understand the process, one teacher claimed that the feedback sometimes is discouraging. This could be due to the nature of the comments, questions and remarks, and how these are written by some facilitators in the journals. We therefore have to ensure that we are sensitive when giving feedback on teachers' journal entries. Feedback should be for the purpose that it is meant for – to support teachers to conceptualise the process of reflecting and to encourage them to journal. As Samuels and Betts (2008) aptly point out, feedback should be for the

purpose of ensuring success and motivation arising from achievement, and having the potential to promote deeper levels of reflection. Perhaps a more 'friendly' feedback which does not discourage would serve this purpose.

Supportive school structures

From my experience, and from one of the teacher's sentiments, there are no structures in schools that can support the practice of reflective journaling. This has been attributed to head teachers' ignorance of reflective practice. As a result there is no time allocation for this activity. Perhaps if head teachers were aware of the importance of this practice, they could put structures in place that would encourage teachers to journal, leading to a greater sustenance of the practice.

One suggestion is that head teachers of the schools from which we draw our teachers for CEPs should first of all be recruited into our Certificate in Leadership courses that introduce them to reflective practice. This will lead to them realise the importance of the practice and, hence, perhaps put structures in place that may support teachers' reflective practice. Boud and Walker (1998) suggest that context is perhaps the single most important influence on reflection and learning. It can either permit or inhibit the activity of journal writing.

Conclusion

Findings from this study indicate that teachers have several reasons why they find it challenging to reflect through journaling. These range from: the structure of the Certificate in Education Programmes, lack of time and the way reflective practice is introduced to them, to teacher motivation and lack of structures to support the practice.

If our goal of introducing reflective practice to teachers for continuous professional development and learning for improvement of their classroom practice is to be achieved, we have to re-think several issues as articulated above.

Notes on contributor

Ruth Ombonya Otienoh is a teacher by profession. She obtained her BEd at the University of Nairobi (1983) and MEd in teacher education at the Aga Khan University–Institute for Educational Development in Karachi, Pakistan (2000). She taught in several Kenyan high schools for several years. Currently, Ruth is a teacher educator at the Aga Khan University–Institute for Educational Development, Eastern Africa. At the same time, she is in the third year of an EdD programme at the Institute of Education, University of London, UK.

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Appendix 1.   Interview guide

General Introductory Questions

- For how long have you been teaching?
- For how long had you been teaching by the time you attended the Certificate in Education programme?
- Why did you choose to attend the programme?
- What did you expect to achieve/learn from the programme?
- Were your expectations met?

Reflective Practice Specific Questions

- What do you remember about reflective practice? Knowledge of the concept to be explored – what it means; types of reflections; process of reflecting etc.
- How was this concept introduced to you? Comment on the theoretical and practical experience.
- How did you find the experience you had of reflective practice during the programme? Different ways of reflecting (reflective dialogue and journal writing) to be explored.
- What about the experience of journal writing? – Issues of daily writing of journals, sharing these with programme facilitators and getting feedback to be explored.
- Did you find it useful during the programme? Why? Why not?
- Do you still reflect? Why and why not?
- How do you reflect? Different ways of reflecting to be asked.
- How do you find journal writing? – Issues of time, and other enabling aspects of journal writing to be explored.
- Do you face any challenges with this concept of reflective practice? Every challenge to be deeply explored.
- How do you go about dealing with the challenges?

Appendix 2.   Aga Khan University research consent form

آغــاخان يونيورسِـٹی

THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY
Institute for Educational Development
CONSENT FORM

I understand the overview given to me, on the study titled '**Exploring the use of semi-structured interviews in a small scale qualitative study.**' And I consent to be a research participant in the study.

It is my understanding that:

- This study focuses on exploring the use of semi-structured interviews for the purpose of finding out the type of data they elicit in case of interviewer position in the study, as an insider.
- My identity will remain confidential and my name or the name of my institution will not be used in the study or in reporting its findings at any point;
- The purpose of the study is NOT to judge me on the issue of the type of responses I give during the interview.
- I hold the right to decline to answer any question;
- I hold the right to withdraw from the study at any point in time; and
- I will receive a copy of the final report of the study.

I express my willingness to participate in the study by signing this form:

Name: _____
Designation: _____
Name of institution: _____
City, Country: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

For further information or to lodge any concerns, please contact the Planning Head of the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development, Eastern Africa at the address listed on the bottom of the page.