Behind the scenes of reflective practice in professional development: A glance into the ethical predicaments of secondary school teachers

Ilana Finefter-Rosenbluh

Harvard Graduate School of Education, 13 Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Reflective practice may compromise students' and teachers' privacy.
- Reflective practice may mitigate students' learning processes.
- Reflective practice may subvert teachers' ethical relationships with colleagues.
- Ethical dilemmas upon reflective practices in PD may engender moral injury.
- Clear boundaries should be set between formative and summative evaluations.

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ABSTRACT

This case study examined 12 American secondary school teachers' ethical predicaments involving reflective practices in professional development programs (PDPs), and the impact of these predicaments on their school's work processes. Qualitative measures revealed ethical ramifications of professional development's (PD) reflective procedures, whereby teachers experienced deleterious effects regarding their students and their colleagues, to the extent that teachers may have experienced moral injury. Furthermore, findings showed that teachers who served as group facilitators struggled to set an ethical balance between formative evaluation and summative evaluation, to the extent of violating confidential PD codes. Implications for reflective practices in PD are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, teachers' professional development (PD) has received attention within the school reform and school improvement literature, pursuant to the belief that student learning and student success are primarily due to teacher effectiveness (OECD, 2009; see also in Opfer & Pedder, 2011 on teacher PD in England). In the U.S., standard-based reforms, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the Race to the Top (2015), and their emphasis on teacher quality and accountability, have led states to adopt numerous educational policies designed to improve teaching practices. Accordingly, policymakers have placed greater emphasis on PD, and educators are expected to take an active part in ongoing programs that aim to enhance "one's personal growth and job skills, and improve one's job performance in order to contribute to outstanding educational results for students" (see National Education Association, Providing Ongoing Professional Development, 2015).

Striving for these objectives perhaps explains why administrators, such as the school principal in this study, and policymakers often address specific practices in PD, which are considered to play a key role in building an effective learning environment:

> PD structure, which is not just conferences and not just training, but the structures for ongoing learning like Colleagues in Action, like mentoring, like deep ongoing kind of processes where teachers can really unpack their practice and learn … improving the quality of teaching, so that it puts students at the gist … [1]

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[1] "Mr. Robinson," the principal of an American Northeastern High School. Personal interview, conducted on May 30, 2011.

NEA … believes *every* student in America … deserves a quality education (National Education Association- Vision, Mission, and Values, 2015) … NEA's vision … designed to be used as resources for identification, reflection, guidance, and inspiration (Highlights in Teacher Quality, 2015).

These quotations illustrate the fundamental place of *reflection* in PD through associating it with fairness and justice—as every student "deserves a quality education"—and advocating for practices that propose to support teachers in bringing an effective and just education to their students (see also Fishman, Marx, Best, & Tal, 2003; Guskey, 2000). Ultimately, reflecting upon and understanding what is good and what is bad, right or wrong in professional practice may affect teachers on the horns of ethical dilemmas, even to the extent of attrition (Santoro & Morehouse, 2011).

The importance of reflection in teaching and learning processes has been thoroughly discussed over the years (e.g., Brookfield, 1995; Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1987), and it was over eighty years ago when Dewey (1933) eloquently called for teachers to take reflective action, which entails "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (p. 9).

Today, the concept of reflective practice—which may include mentoring, peer involvement, and critical reflection upon experience (e.g., see in Larrivee, 2000; Mercado & Baecher, 2014; Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2007)—is widely employed in teacher PD and plays a role in many programs of beginning teacher education (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015, see for instance p. 82, beginning teachers take courses in reflective practices; Harford & MacRuairc, 2008; see also in Loughran, 2002).

Yet, little is known about teachers' ethical predicaments with procedures of reflective practice in PD. In fact, while ethical dilemmas in contexts of reflective practice have been greatly acknowledged, for example, in nurse education (Hargreaves, 1997), reflective practice has been mostly examined in teaching as *a way to identify* ethical dilemmas in beginning teacher education (see Larrivee, 2000; McDonough, 2014).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to shed light on teachers' ethical predicaments regarding procedures of reflective practice in professional development programs (PDPs), and to understand in what ways these predicaments may affect work processes in the school setting. This research, a case study based on twelve teachers in a single American high school, seeks to investigate teachers' ethical predicaments regarding reflective practices in PD. The study stands on the premise that a comprehensive examination of these practices could offer a solid explanation to why PDPs may fall short.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of the mixed studies on PD and reflective practice, and shed light on aspects of professional ethics and proceduralism, the basis of PD procedures that teachers are expected to follow. Then, by drawing on various reflective practice scenarios, I delve into a set of ethical dilemmas, described by teachers, and dissect them. On the foundation of this analysis, ethical PD aspects will be highlighted, in the hope that it may assist in enhancing administrators', educators', and policymakers' awareness of vital ethical principles that should be taken into consideration when developing and implementing PDPs in schools.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The complexity of PD and reflective practice

PD has been defined as educators' participation in processes that seek to improve teaching practices and students' learning (Guskey, 2000, p. 16). Teaching improvement is embedded in a broad framework of activities that seek to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills, which may also contribute to their personal, social, and emotional growth (Desimone, 2009). Ultimately, teaching practices have a significant impact on students' learning processes and intellectual abilities (Finefter-Rosenbluh & Court, 2014), and teacher quality has a major influence on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Often, PD aims to provide a safe space for teachers' professional growth, namely, a place that is independent of teacher evaluation. According to Scriven (1967), there are inherent differences between assessing teachers' performance and providing them unconditional support. Scriven differentiated between *summative evaluation,* which focuses on drawing conclusions about teachers' performance, and *formative evaluation*, which seeks to facilitate teachers' ongoing development by providing non-judgmental feedback related to aspects of performance. In other words, while the purpose of summative evaluation is to help administrators make better decisions through judgmental and adjudicative interactions (see Neal, 1992; Stake, 1967), formative evaluation seeks to help teachers thrive through "collaborative and individual reflection" (Clark, 2012, p. 208).

In general, reflection encapsulates "the process of engaging with learning and/or professional practice that provides an opportunity to critically analyze and evaluate that learning or practice" (Black & Plowright, 2010, p. 246). Reflection also both influences and is influenced by the processes involved in dialogical teaching and collaboration (see Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, McIntyre, & Demers, 2008, p. 190). As such, reflection is not an end in itself, but rather a vehicle used in the transformation of raw experience, which ultimately serves the larger purpose of the moral growth of the individual and society. In fact, while processes of reflection can happen in solitude, learners may greatly broaden their understanding of an experience when reflecting in community with others, even more than when doing it in isolation (Rodgers, 2002).

Acknowledging that teachers need to learn in and from teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2008), reflective teachers should not only examine dilemmas of classroom practice, but must also take responsibility for their own PD, and be aware of assumptions and values they bring in teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Yet, to its detriment, the term *reflective practice* is very broad (Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Richardson, 1992), and as Korthagen (2004) and Loughran (2002) have indicated, it may lend itself to multiple interpretations. According to Loughran (2002), for some, this term "simply means thinking about something, whereas for others, it is a well defined and crafted practice that carries very specific meaning and associated action" (p. 33). Still, one element of reflection is common to many, and it is the notion of a problem—defining the problem and understanding the way it is framed or reframed—to understand and develop professional knowledge.

According to Donald Schön, one of the most prominent thinkers in the field of teacher education, it is important to reflect on experiences as they occur (Schön, 1982). To emphasize the concept of reflection, Schön (1987) coined the distinction between *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. The former occurs in situations where the action yields unexpected consequences and refers to teachers being aware of their decisions as they work, while the latter refers to reflecting back on and critiquing one's practice (see also in Lavoué, Molinari, Prié, & Khezami, 2015; Moon, 2013). In any case, the use of reflective practice in teacher PD is based on the premise that teachers may improve their teaching by systematically reflecting on experiences (Farrell, 2004, 2007).

That being said, there is no consensus on which reflective practices promote teacher development and improve classroom practices (Farrell, 2007). With the diversity in literature on this subject, especially regarding identifying the essential components