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Using video to promote early childhood teachers' thinking and reflection

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Video and collective dialogue supports EC teachers' reflection on their practice.
- Collective reflection encouraged critique of teachers' own and others' practice.
- Teachers valued professional learning gained from viewing video of their practice.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines findings from a qualitative study employing group stimulated-recall interviews using video-recordings of early childhood teachers to elicit their thinking and reflections about their teaching interactions. It focuses on the value of video to enable teachers to reflect on their practices and the extent to which collectively viewing recorded episodes allows negotiated understandings of their own and other teachers' practices. Whilst these findings suggest that video and collective dialogue are useful professional learning tools for teachers to examine and improve their teaching, structural and relational challenges exist that may impact on how effectively such tools are used.

1. Introduction

Since Dewey's (1933) pioneering work to improve the quality of schools and education through teacher reflective practice (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000) numerous empirical studies have focused on understanding the links between teacher thought and action (e.g., see Mena Marcos and Tillema's, 2006, review of 50 studies published between the years 2000 and 2005). The assertion that being able to critically assess and improve pedagogical practices in order to improve outcomes for learners is at the heart of many of these studies.

Whilst overall the literature supports reflection in teaching as positive and a good thing for teachers to engage in, Zeichner (1994) has cautioned against "an uncritical celebration of teacher reflection" (p. 18). Engaging in reflection or making tacit teaching practices explicit is insufficient (Loughran, 2002; Zeichner, 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Indeed, Loughran (2002) has argued teachers may rationalise their practices rather than reflect upon them. Furthermore, Zeichner has suggested there is potential for reflection to "legitimate and strengthen practices harmful to students" (1994, p. 18).

Whilst traditionally, reflection has been conceptualised as a predominately individual activity, more recently attention has been given to the collective dimension of reflective practice. Collin and Karsanti (2011) offer a model of interactional reflective practice drawing on Vygotsky's concept of semiotic mediation. In this model, verbal interactions amongst student teachers and their instructors focused on professional practice, and located at Vygotsky's interpsychological level, contributed to the development of student teachers' reflective practice alongside their internalised reflection, at the intrapersonal level.

Davis (2006) has differentiated between productive and unproductive reflection, stating that unproductive reflection is typically descriptive, lacks focus, relies on judgemental framing (such as "I liked…") and does not include analysis or evaluation. In contrast, productive reflection includes questioning assumptions, being open to different perspectives, being analytical, integrating

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knowledge, and being able to "see, attend to, and analyse the connections and relationships in a classroom" (Davis, 2006, p. 283). This latter process, Davis argued, is akin to Goodwin's notion of "professional vision" – a particular view of phenomena shaped by the "social and cognitive organisation of a profession" (1994, p. 626) – applied by Sherin and Han (2004) to refer to teachers learning to see, interpret and think about classroom events significant to teaching and learning. In a similar vein, Marland and Osborne conceptualised such processes as "teacher interactive thinking" (1990, p. 94) to describe teachers' thinking about their interactions, including how best to relate and respond to students in an individualised manner as a result of interpreting their cues (Mitchell & Marland, 1989).

Much of the research into teacher reflection focuses on schooling or teacher education contexts. Within the early childhood (EC) context, relatively little empirical research has focused on the influence of teachers' thinking and reflection on their pedagogical interactions with young children. Although aspects of EC teaching are similar to teaching in other sectors, there are also unique aspects which contribute to the complexity of EC teaching. Internationally, teachers in early childhood education (ECE) contexts typically teach with at least one other teacher and, whilst the size of teaching teams varies between and within countries depending on the EC service, team teaching is the norm (Spodek & Saracho, 2005). Required levels of teacher credentials also vary, internationally and within teams. Thus, many teams comprise a mix of staff with degree-level teaching credentials, sub-degree qualifications, or no EC-specific qualification. EC teachers work in close partnership with parents and often with extended families and communities. Daily programmes take place in inside and outdoor contexts, across a range of activities that include play, regular events and routines, and academic work, and may be offered as half-day, school-day or full-day programmes. Due to the age of those in their charge, teachers are involved in both the care and education of young children. This combination of structural and relational features creates particular challenges for EC teachers' engagement in thinking and reflection about their practices. Thus, it is important to investigate teacher reflection in the context of EC and not rely on findings from research conducted in schooling or teacher education contexts.

This study aimed to provide insights into EC teachers' thinking and reflection, individually and as members of a teaching team, and how these aspects influenced their use of interactive pedagogical strategies (Cherrington, 2011). This article discusses how teachers' engagement in collective dialogue about video-recorded episodes of their practice, facilitated reflection and created effective learning opportunities.

1.1. Reflective practice in early childhood education

Internationally, empirical research has found that being able to reflect on and articulate the beliefs and theories that underpin their practice is challenging for EC practitioners (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002; Stephen, 2010; Wood & Bennett, 2000). Similarly, surfacing their teaching intentions and use of pedagogic strategies and behaviours is problematic for teachers uncomfortable with the concept of pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford, 1999) and who have an intuitive approach to their teaching (Stephen, 2010). The tacit nature of EC teachers' pedagogical knowledge was evident in Moyles et al.'s (2002) English *Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning* project, and in a Scottish study of how teachers supported young children's exploration of technological resources (Stephen, 2010). Stephen argued that these "taken-for-granted" (2010, p. 23) attitudes towards pedagogical practices result in practitioners undervaluing their contribution to children's learning and limited opportunities to improve teaching through reflection on practice. Moyles et al. (2002) report practitioners' difficulty in articulating the connections between their "underlying beliefs, their reflection, knowledge and thinking within their practice" (2002, p. 467). Similarly, in the U.S., Kugelmass and Ross-Bernstein's (2000) case study of an experienced teacher's interactions with children found discrepancies between the theoretical knowledge and implicit understandings held by the teacher.

Several New Zealand studies have highlighted factors such as time constraints and interpersonal aspects which may challenge EC teachers' ability to engage in reflection, and which may also be present in ECE contexts beyond New Zealand. Whilst engaging in professional discussions as part of their work-day rather than after-hours enhanced teachers' involvement in a teacher network (Mitchell, 2003), Healy's (2012) case study of professional dialogue within a teaching team identified that a lack of time and suitable spaces were barriers to engaging in dialogue. Also influential were the centre's organisational culture (Healy, 2012), along with employer support for professional learning (Mitchell, 2003). Grey's (2011) study highlighted the importance of creating a trusting environment where practitioners can engage in professional dialogue about practice; Healy found that social talk was often an important precursor to deeper professional dialogue.

Engaging in collective reflection or professional dialogue (Grey, 2011; Healy, 2012) with colleagues creates opportunities for teachers to de-privatise (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) and critique their practices. Teachers engaging in professional dialogue in Grey's (2011) study noted several benefits: gaining insights into the congruity between their espoused and actual practices, engaging in reflection on their practices, and strengthening relationships between team members. Similarly, teachers in Mitchell's (2003) study identified that their discussions were a catalyst for thinking about practice, prompting them to re-think their assumptions and beliefs. In her study of EC teachers' perceptions of teaching science, Edwards (2009) noted the interplay between individual and collective reflections within the teaching team, suggesting that group dialogue had an important role to play in assisting individual teachers to identify and think about their beliefs and pedagogy.

1.2. Using video representations to support teacher reflection

Video recordings of teachers' pedagogical practices have been used to foster professional dialogue and reflection. For example, groups of school teachers are viewing and discussing episodes of their teaching in *video clubs* (Sherin & van Es, 2009) whilst Bayat (2010) has suggested that using video to reflect on teaching prompted productive reflection amongst student teachers. Borko, Koellner, Jacobs and Seago argue that video representations of teaching "can be used to create a shared experience, serving as a focal point for teachers' collaborative exploration of the central activities of teaching" (2011, p. 176). Several studies have noted how using video allows teachers to, in effect, slow down the pace of teaching, facilitating what van Es and Sherin describe as "learning to notice" (2008, p. 245) particular aspects of teaching and learning. Rosaen, Lundeberg, Cooper, Fritzen, and Terpstra (2008) suggest that video records offer unique opportunities for teacher growth, as the dissonance between participants' memories of their teaching and the video-recorded evidence "jars complacency" (p. 358). Similarly, Zhang, Lundeberg, Koehler, and Eberhardt's (2011) study found that a key affordance of student teachers viewing video of their own and others teaching was the opportunity to gain new perspectives and "to see things you don't usually see" (p. 458).

Within ECE contexts, video recordings of teacher practices have helped teachers "perceive discontinuities between their intentions and actions" (Wood & Bennett, 2000, p. 639), and recognise how