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Characterizing productive reflection among preservice elementary teachers: Seeing what matters

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Abstract

Effective teachers consider interrelationships among aspects of teaching including learners, subject matter knowledge, assessment, and instruction. The 70 journal entries of 25 preservice elementary teachers are analyzed to characterize the teachers' written reflection. One focus of the analysis is on how the preservice teachers integrate ideas about these aspects of teaching. The preservice teachers sometimes integrate ideas about learners with ideas about instruction. Further analyses illustrate the difference between integrating ideas and simply juxtaposing them. The paper illuminates how reflecting on multiple aspects of teaching may help new teachers integrate their knowledge and begin to develop a more complex view of teaching.

Keywords: Preservice teachers; Reflection; Knowledge integration

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

Methods instructors, field supervisors, and cooperating teachers often expect preservice teachers to reflect in writing on teaching they observe or enact. Yet we know surprisingly little about the substance of these written reflections. On what do preservice teachers reflect? We do know that simply providing opportunities for teachers to reflect is insufficient because the reflection promoted may not be very productive. Productive reflection allows teachers to develop and demonstrate a more complex view of teaching. Teacher educators must determine the extent to which tasks promote productive reflection. How can they tell? Given an emphasis on developing a more complex view of teaching, one indicator of productive reflection is the integration of ideas about multiple aspects of teaching, such as learners and learning, subject matter knowledge, assessment, and instruction. Another indicator is how analytic the reflection is. The study reported here characterizes how preservice elementary teachers integrate their ideas about teaching in their written reflections as well as how they analyze their teaching.

"Seeing what matters" in the title has a double meaning here. First, as teacher educators, we hope our preservice teachers will learn to see what matters in a classroom. Second, we too must be able to see what matters—we need to determine to what extent the preservice teachers we teach are starting to develop a complex view of

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teaching. Toward both of these ends, this study asks:

> What aspects of teaching do preservice teachers consider, emphasize, and integrate when they reflect on their own teaching?
> What does their knowledge integration look like and how analytic are they when they reflect?

1.1. Defining reflection and productive reflection

Though many scholars provide historical and conceptual reviews of how reflection has been used in teacher education, the field lacks consensus on defining or even describing reflection among teachers (see, e.g., Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Calderhead, 1989; Fendler, 2003; Hatton & Smith, 1995; LaBoskey, 1994; Rodgers, 2002; and many others). Consider a few of these perspectives. For example, for Dewey (1933)—foundational in any exploration of reflection—reflective thought was "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 9). Dewey said reflection needs to inform future action and be informed by evidence. For Dewey, reflection is both a meaning-making process and a disciplined way of thinking (Rodgers, 2002).

van Manen's (1977) hierarchy, used extensively by teacher educators, includes technical, practical, and critical reflection. Technical reflection assumes a set of agreed-upon goals and involves consideration of means for reaching those goals, while practical reflection involves considering and questioning both goals and means (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Critical reflection adds to these the consideration of moral or ethical issues. Some authors emphasize the importance of each of these types of reflection (e.g., Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Hatton & Smith, 1995; LaBoskey, 1994) while others value mainly critical reflection. Teacher educators also draw extensively on the ideas of Schön (1982), who characterizes reflection as reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-on-action includes planning and looking back on one's practice. Reflection-in-action, on the other hand, guides teachers' in-the-moment decision-making, and depends on their interactions with learners. Hatton and Smith build on Dewey's, van Manen's, and Schön's ideas. Their developmental (not hierarchical) taxonomy includes technical rationality, reflection-on-action (descriptive, dialogical, and critical reflection), and reflection-in-action. They distinguish these forms of reflection from purely descriptive writing, which they say is not reflective, although to be sure effective teachers must be able to describe teaching scenarios richly. Others, too, modify existing taxonomies or develop their own, adding to the complexity of defining this construct (e.g., Francis, 1995; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Loughran, 2002; Rearick & Feldman, 1999). Furthermore, some empirical work indicates that categories of reflection are overlapping rather than separate levels or domains (e.g., McMahon, 1997).

As a teacher educator, in this study I use *reflection* to indicate what preservice teachers write in response to a task in which they are asked to reflect on their teaching. They are engaging in reflection-on-action rather than reflection-in-action, and their "reflection" is rarely, if ever, as disciplined as Dewey would have liked. Descriptive writing is included in this study of reflection because it is intended by the writers to be reflective; also, the writing is rarely *purely* descriptive.

I distinguish, however, between productive and unproductive reflection (Davis, 2003). *Unproductive reflection* is mainly descriptive, without much analysis, and involves listing ideas rather than connecting them logically. Without support or practice, preservice teachers may engage mainly in unproductive reflection (see Davis, Petish, & Smithey, accepted pending revisions). For example, preservice teachers may not analyze their teaching very well. They do not consistently provide evidence for their claims, generate alternatives to their decisions, or question their assumptions (e.g., Abell, Bryan, & Anderson, 1998; Harrington & Hathaway, 1994; LaBoskey, 1994; Zembal-Saul, Blumenfeld, & Krajcik, 2000), which were important considerations for Dewey (1933). Furthermore, their reflection may lack focus and be judgmental rather than evaluative (Abell et al., 1998).

In addition, preservice and new teachers tend initially to place primary importance on themselves as teachers, as opposed to on children as learners (Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Bown, 1975; LaBoskey, 1994), though they do not do so exclusively, of course, especially with scaffolding (e.g., Conway & Clark, 2003; Harrington & Quinn-Leering, 1996; Hoover, 1994). When they do consider learners, they may focus on student interest and motivation, rather than on students' learning of content (Abell et al., 1998), or they may not integrate ideas about