



Research paper

Countering deficit discourse: Preservice teacher experiences of core reflection

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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study documents a 12 week study of student teacher's experiences with core reflection.
- Student teachers experienced core reflection as a tool for surfacing (deficit) discourses.
- Student teachers used core reflection to counter deficit discourses.

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ABSTRACT

In these pages, I describe a twelve-week qualitative study which explored how three student teachers experienced core reflection as a counter-discourse to the various “deficit discourses” they encountered and enacted during this time of their teacher education program. The results of this study suggest that core reflection may play a role in how student teachers experience the process of surfacing, interrogating, countering, and expanding beyond “deficit discourses.”

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Danielewicz (2001) argued, “Discourses are powerfully constructive of identities” (p. 11). The constructive nature of discourses has consequences not only for teachers, but also for the students whom inhabit their classrooms. Since discourse often manifests “as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak,” (Foucault, 1972, p. 42), teacher educators should assist teacher candidates in interrogating the discourses they encounter, particularly those discourses that cause teachers to view students through a deficit lens. This paper looks at what happens when discourses are interrogated using core reflection. In these pages, I describe a twelve-week qualitative study that explored how three student teachers experienced core reflection as a counter-discourse to the various “deficit discourses” they encountered and enacted during this time of their teacher education program. The results of this study suggest that core reflection may play a role in how student teachers experience the process of surfacing, interrogating, countering, and expanding beyond “deficit discourses.”

Several scholars have discussed the ways teachers' participation in discourse contributes to limited learning. One such example is James' (2012) study which focused on the ways discourse

contributed to the deficit thinking of six American elementary school teachers. The teachers in this study participated in and reproduced discourses that constructed their students as deficient and in need of care in ways that reflected the teachers' biography rather than the “felt needs” of the students. As James (2012) argued, these discourses “resisted adaptation to individual students' realities, in part, because those notions ‘rang true’ within the larger discursive context” (p. 171). Studies such as James' and others (e.g., Britzman, 2003; Kumashiro, 2002; Nygreen, 2013), suggest a need for a way to disrupt deficit discourses, particularly for those teachers working with students from historically marginalized populations.

As the study that informs this paper suggests, bringing strengths, or “core qualities,” such as empathy, to the forefront may help novice teachers begin to develop additional discourses through which to see their students. During this shift, the emphasis evolved from a deficit “problem orientation” to a “potential focused” orientation. Additionally, the actualization of strengths, as suggested by positive psychological theory, has been shown to assist in developing resilience during times when teachers may otherwise be inclined to resign themselves to the negative influence of external constraints (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007).

Developed in the Netherlands by Fred Korthagen and Angelo Vasalos, core reflection draws on positive (see Seligman &

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Csikzentmihalyi, 2000) and gestalt (see Kempler, 1973) psychological frameworks to empower teachers through a guided analysis of assets, obstacles, and ideals while also calling for a reflection upon thoughts, feelings, and desires as it relates to practice (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). In light of these intended outcomes, I explored the research question: How do student teachers at a large Midwestern university in the United States experience core reflection? Though exploration of this research question yielded several findings, I explore one finding in particular in this paper: core reflection seemed to be experienced as a tool for uncovering, interrogating, and countering deficit discourses.

1. Background

Core reflection uses the “Onion Model” (see Fig. 1 below) as a framework to make explicit the various ways one’s identity, beliefs, and behaviors interact and manifest in the surrounding environment. Using this model as a guide, core reflection becomes a dialogue between a coach and a participant (in this case a student teacher) regarding problems they experience in the classroom. Core reflection particularly emphasizes consideration of a teaching ideal and the core qualities that manifest in this ideal because these areas represent the core of the person (according to core reflection theory). By considering the interplay between the inner and outer layers of the Onion Model, core reflection allows for a more holistic view of the processes that may inform teaching. This study suggests that the belief layer represents the nexus between personal and communal discourse, an idea I explore further in the conceptual framework section.

The process of core reflection consists of discussion upon four basic aspects of teaching situations: (1) a problem; (2) an ideal; (3) core qualities of the teacher (i.e., character strengths); and (4) obstacles to putting core qualities into practice. Typically, I began core reflection by placing four placemats on the ground (see Fig. 2) and asking a participant to stand on the “Problem Situation” placemat and then describe a problem they perceived in their classroom. Following this, a participant described the thoughts, feelings, and

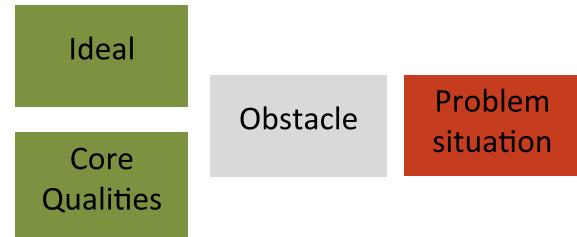


Fig. 2. Core reflection placemats (Korthagen & Evelein, 2015).

desires they considered during these problems. Next, I asked a participant to walk to the “Ideal” placemat and describe the same situation as if it had occurred in the most ideal way possible. From there, a participant walked to the “Core Qualities” placemat and discussed any of their strengths (i.e., core qualities) that may have appeared in the ideal. I then followed up by asking a participant to stand on the “Obstacle” placemat and talk about obstacles that kept them from drawing on these core qualities. At this point in core reflection, reflection upon obstacles often surfaced discourses that seemed to inform their beliefs about the problem situation. I then asked a participant to step outside of the placemats and reconsider the situation as a choice between fixating on the obstacle (e.g., discourse) or instead choosing to draw on their core qualities (and its associated counter-discourse). We concluded by conducting a role play that allowed them to practice these core qualities and followed up by discussing the thoughts, feelings, and desires they had when using these qualities. The process of contrasting thoughts, feelings, and desires encountered during the role play versus thoughts, feelings, and desires encountered during the problem situation seemed to help the teacher candidate develop new discursive strategies to draw upon during problematic situations.

The literature on core reflection is limited. Core reflection was first mentioned more than a decade ago (see Korthagen, 2004). Since then, it has undergone only limited study in the United States

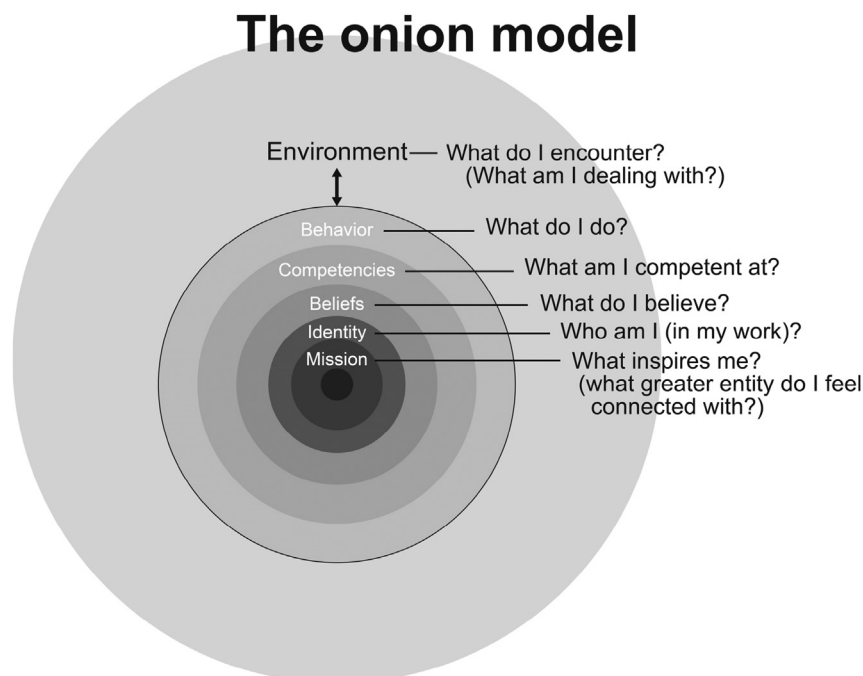


Fig. 1. The onion model (Korthagen & Evelein, 2015).

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